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ROBERT W. LOWNDES, Editor

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Know Your West

A Department For Western Story Readers

By Harold Gluck

ROAD AGENTS

FROM HIS position on the hilltop, Jed Ogilby could see every inch of the road covered by the stagecoaches that traveled between Cheyenne and Deadwood. He was tall, thin, and not unpleasant when he smiled. Around his hip was a well-filled cartridge belt and he was a "two-gun man." His right gun was loaded with 6 deadly .45's, while the other contained only blank cartridges. His eyes were focused on a small spot to the north that was getting larger and larger. He turned to the man at his side and spoke.

"Guess it's about time we got down to the road. When the driver sees the tree, he's goin' to stop. Tom Murray will be driving the coach; and if they got bullion, then I think Mike Drew will be shotgun messenger."

The middle-aged, heavy-set man, to whom those words were addressed, sighed; the life of a road-agent wasn't exactly to his liking. But Frank Moore

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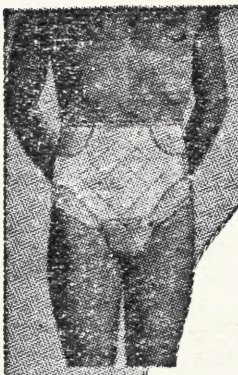

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found Jed to be the type of man that was handy to have when trouble was in the making.

"Why can't we try our hand at a bit of prospectin'," he complained. "It's getting harder and harder every month to hold up a stagecoach. And when they carry pay dirt you always find they got a well armed guard in front and back of the coach."

Jed didn't bother to notice or answer the complaint. It was sort of tough to have as partner a man whose appetite couldn't be satisfied by ten pancakes and four cups of coffee; all the profits seemed to go into the hopeless task of feeding Frank.

Tom Murray saw the fallen tree in his way, stopped his coach, then got down from his seat to look over the situation and decide whether he would need help from his two male passengers. But when he looked up, he found himself gazing at two masked men, one of them held two six-shooters at close range.

"What, again?" he protested.

"Again" was the echo.

"You can search the coach from top to bottom," he said, "and you'll find I'm carrying nothing at all. Four passengers this time. Two men and two women."

"The two men get out of this coach, and pronto," ordered Jed. "The women can stay in. We are gentlemen; we never rob nor molest any female."

The two men came down onto the road and an eldery gray haired man gave vent to his thoughts. "This is an outrage. I shall write to my Congressman and demand he send federal troops to protect a citizen of the United States."

Jed pulled the trigger of the gun that had the blank cartridges three times. One of the women screamed, and the man almost fell to the ground.

"That's a nice ulster you are wearing," commented Jed to the elderly man. "Take it off and give it to my partner." Then he noticed the fine boots worn by the other passenger.

"What size?" he asked.

"Size twelve," replied the passenger.

"That's fine," said Jed. "Now you take those boots off and give them to my partner, and he will give you his old boots. He needs a size twelve and is wearing size eleven."

After the boots and ulster had changed hands, Jed made the two men empty their pockets. The cash totaled up to $123.67. Frank was cashier of the partnership and the money went into his pocket.

"Now get back into that coach and drive like the blazes," ordered Jed, and again fired the gun with the blank cartridges. However it was necessary for Frank to give a hand to the driver to move the tree out of the road.

Inside the coach, the two male passengers looked glum, but the women seemed happy; they would have a tale to tell to their children. Then one of the women smiled. She removed her shoe and remarked rather coyly.

"I keep my bankroll right in my stocking on the bottom. If they searched my pocketbook, all they would have found is just one silver dollar." The other woman said nothing; she was observing the younger man, who had made no complaint—even though he had lost his boots.

Back in the safety of the hills, Frank put his left hand to his back pocket to take out the wallet in which they kept the proceeds of their work, in order to add the newly-acquired cash money. Then he yelled. "I wuz robbed! When we changed boots, that young feller came close-up to me. And picked my pocket. We need protection!"

Question: Can you spot the big error in this story? You'll find the answer at the end of this department.

●

THE MOUNTAIN MAN MAKES MONEY

THE COACH had crossed Big Sandy twice and now was going

[*Turn To Page* 103]

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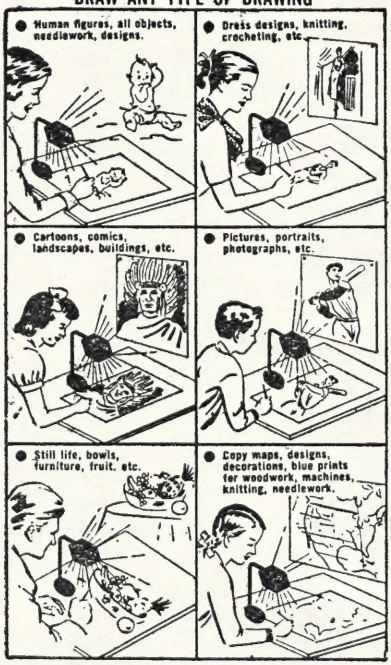
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Below them, Lieutenant Russell could see that the wagons were under attack.

Feature Novel of Deadly Greed

RENEGADE RIFLES

by LAURAN PAINE

A courageous enemy, fighting for his home, his people, and his way of life can be admired — even if his way of fighting is cruel and barbaric. But there can be nothing but hate and contempt for those who supply him with advanced weapons, to make a fortune out of your blood!

CAPTAIN Daniel Fury. Appropriately named. Lieutenant Russell stomped angrily across the parade ground and little wisps of dust arose from the slam of his booted heels.

The army at its best was bad enough, and Apaches on the warpath didn't make life any easier; but now this new captain from back East, with his regulation bearing, clean uniform, and orthodox manner, was almost unbearable.

Lee Russell passed an enlisted trooper and ignored the man's salute. The soldier looked surprised and shrugged; even the good ones had their bad moments. Lieutenant Russell was known as a soldier's soldier. A little lax, perhaps, but a good officer and a real man. The soldier shrugged again and ambled off toward the mess hall.

Russell entered his log hutment and slammed the heavy pine door with more force than was necessary. Thirty-eight miles since morning with his troop under a blistering sun, and now this replacement officer had ordered him back out with his men for nightly scouting duty. Damned fool. He'd learn about this frontier; he'd learn to sweat until his soul writhed in misery, and his thoughts would turn to stealing water from the enlisted men. He'd learn about hostiles, too; he'd see men without eyeballs in their sockets and without tongues and scalps. Russell's

normally good-natured, strong face was unpleasant in its anger. He smiled grimly, harsh lines etched acidly around his large mouth. Damned fool. Russell would make it a point to break this dandified pig if it was the last thing he ever did.

Under strict order from Captain Fury, Lieutenant Russell's B troop moved off on fresh horses after retreat and mess. No one said much; even the troopers who stood retreat were outraged at this order that made dog-tired men ride out twice in the same day, when the Fort was full of men who hadn't been in a saddle for thirty-six hours.

B troop was grim-faced, and a smouldering fire lay deep in the pool of red-rimmed eyes as the cavalrymen left the Fort behind. Sergeant Ludwig rode just behind Lieutenant Russell. When the Fort was far behind he began to swear in a throaty monotone with a heavy Teutonic accent. The lieutenant listened for several moments before telling him to shut up. He enjoyed hearing his subordinate swear, because the non-com was doing exactly what he himself wanted to do; Russell knew, as did every man who could hear the Sergeant, whom Ludwig was swearing at.

B troop rode North by West. They were to follow the Overland Trail for the customary fifteen miles, make a large circle, then return to garrison. The same routine every time. By now every hostile for five hundred miles knew that cavalry patrols out of Fort Walker always made the same circle.

Russell rode at the head of the silent, glum troopers and weary thoughts chased one another through his tired mind in time to the muffled clop, clop of his horse's hoofs. The first year on the frontier had been like this. Patrols every few days, interspersed with occasional guard-detachments for wagon-trains of settlers and freighters going farther West. Then the Apaches banded together and began to wage war in earnest. They were fighters unequaled in history—ruthless, more deadly than sin, awesome fanatics. Russell shook his head. Why the United States was willing to have good soldiers slaughtered, just to keep this burned-out corner of hell, was beyond him.

The hostiles were lethal and treacherous when they were sober; but now it was tiswin time, when they gathered far back in the bleak mountains and held their annual drunk.

The moon was eerily opaque, the desert lighted by white, watery opalescence. B troop came up on the Trail. They bisected it, and followed deeply ground out ruts for mile after mile. The troopers talked in undertones among themselves in order to stay awake. It was difficult to fight off the desire to doze, especially when the horses rocked so gently and rythmically along in the cool night.

Routine patrol. Lieutenant Russell turned and beckoned Sergeant Ludwig forward. The non-com kneed his mount until he was riding stirrup with his superior. "Sergeant, did you ever think how nice it must be, not to be a soldier?"

The broad faced sergeant nodded slowly. "Ja, often haf I tought a solcher I vouldn't be if ofer again I had id to do."

Lieutenant Russell smiled to himself

in the shadows. Otto Ludwig wasn't as big as Germans are supposed to be, nor did he have blond hair or blue eyes; he was powerfully-muscled and flat-faced, with the broad hips and slightly bowed legs of a peasant. "Well, why in hell do you sign on again each time your stint is up?"

Ludwig smiled and shrugged a little apologetically. "Vell, Lieutenant, each dime I go avay from de bost I feel lost." He frowned and scratched his leathery neck. "Vy is dis, I don't know, only dot it is, so each dime I sign on again." Russell nodded.

B troop had almost reached the turn-off where they would begin their great circle that would take them back to garrison and bed, when somewhere ahead, borne on the clear night air, came a rifle shot.

RUSSELL held up a gauntletted hand and the suddenly-alert troops came to a smart halt. The night was quiet except for a distant coyote giving tongue to the moon. An owl, large and swift, swooped knee-high along the desert floor in search of food. B troop sat quietly straining every ear. Lee Russell was about to ignore the shot as the recklessness of a tiswin happy hostile when two more came faintly to his ears. He raised his arm to order the advance, when a fusillade of gunfire broke out. With a slashing movement in the air, the Lieutenant's arm rose and fell and he jumped his horse out into a gallop. B troop, wide-awake now, thundered along behind him.

The sagebrush rocked by in the moonlight, and startled night animals scurried wildly out of the way of the slim blue column of bronzed cavalrymen. Gunfire was intermittent now, as though a seige were in progress, and the noise grew steadily louder.

In front of B troop was a gentle land-swell, the type of rolling land that is so prevalent in Southwestern deserts, as though left behind by long vanished oceans in their march toward the sea. Lee Russell slowed his horse to a walk and, without orders, his troops followed suit. Slowly, cautiously, the officer breasted the land-swell and studied the moonlit desert ahead. At first he didn't see them; then, eyes accustomed to the shape of familiar things, he noticed three large objects in the near distance that were not natural to the earth. He squinted hard and made out the shapes of three shadowy conestoga wagons, their great grey canvas-tops slack against the bowed saplings beneath, looking for all the world like skeletons of prehistoric monsters with rough, gaunt ribs beneath starved hides.

As Russell watched, stabs of orange flame leaped from the brush on both sides of the wagons, and answering daggers of lurid flame snarled back from the wagons. Russell turned to Sergeant Ludwig who was sitting his horse calmly beside him. "Sergeant, ride down the column and tell the men that we'll ride out on the desert East of the wagons. Tell 'em not to make any more noise than they can help; and, Sergeant, dispatch two of the men to the Fort with a report of where we are and what we're doing."

Sergeant Ludwig rode slowly down the column giving the orders, while Lee Russell sat his horse with gloved fists resting on the swells, watching the eerie battle. This was very unusual. Indians, in general, did not fight at night; in fact they would go out of their way to avoid a fight after sundown, because of a prevalent belief that warriors killed at night would never find their way to the hereafter, and would have to spend Eternity in the dark world of In-between.

Sergeant Ludwig rode up beside Russell. "De men know vot ve do." He squinted shrewdly at the dark outlines ahead.

The lieutenant nodded and half-turned in his saddle. The blue line behind him was motionless; even the horses appeared to understand the need for quiet. Russell nodded again toward Ludwig and rode at a walk out toward the eastern desert on his

right. Sergeant Ludwig motioned the troops to follow and, wraithlike, with only a minimum of scabbards rattling against saddlery and squeaking leather, B troop followed their officers.

WHEN HE could no longer see the conestogas, Lieutenant Russell halted the troop, aligned it into one long blue line, and ordered an advance. Sabers flashed in the watery might and B troop advanced behind their lieutenant, ghostly and spectre-like, their sun-darkened faces blobs of grey, unearthly shadows under the cool, wet moonlight. Sergeant Ludwig smiled wolfishly; the pale light outlined the high spots of his features and darkened the less prominent areas, giving his face an old, evil appearance.

B troop came upon the embattled conestogas and broke into a reckless charge over the uneven and brush-studded terrain. The mauraders, taken completely by surprise, were almost ridden down before they heard the soldiers coming. Too late they saw B troop and most of them took to their mocassined heels with the fleetness of brush-rabbits, ducking and dodging among the rank undergrowth. Some, more angered than prudent, stood upright and traded shots with the troopers. Here and there avenging sabers slashed and cut in the pale light as the soldiers paused to give individual battle to the hostiles.

If the country had been devoid of heavy brush, the battle could have been prosecuted with tactical precision; as it was, each soldier was a clean target for the crouching braves; mounted, they were chest-high above the vegetation. The Apaches, on the other hand, could and did take every advantage of the darkened and shadowy brush to fight from concealment.

As Russell rounded a particularly heavy growth of greasewood, a lithe shadow detached itself from the ground and streaked through the air to fasten itself around the officer's neck and shoulders with a grip of constricting rawhide. Russell was dragged from his shying mount and landed heavily with the Apache on top of him. The smell of sour sweat, horse-hair and animal fat struck the lieutenant's nostrils even as he looked up into the wild eyes of the hostile. Locking his legs desperately around the man's middle, he strained mightily and lunged for the throat.

The brave was young and corded all over with supple, hard muscles. He twisted away from Russell's lunging hand and his heavy knife darted through the air. Russell saw the knife coming and half-rolled, so that it missed his throat and slammed into the earth. Grabbing at the knife-arm, the officer held on for dear life, and exerted every bit of strength in his powerful legs around the hostile's midsection. The man grunted and his shadowy face quivered under the powerful pressure. His eyes glazed and Russell could feel the strength in his arms waning. Giving an extra, desperate squeeze that made the muscles of his neck stand out like small ropes, the cavalryman strained with every bit of power in his body. The brave shook violently; his head rolled forward and the strong-smelling body went limp. Russell forced himself to arise but his legs were wobbly and his lungs felt as if they were on fire.

As the officer rose shakily to his feet, Sergeant Ludwig loped up, took in the situation at a glance; without a word, he leaned far forward in his McClellen and thrust his saber through the limp body.

IN THE GLOOMY light of late night, B troop rode among the brush-pockets searching out the attackers. Rifle-fire had lessened, pistol-fire intermittent and scattered. As the skirmish came to a ragged, slow halt, Lee Russell found his horse, mounted and rode up to the three wagons.

He had forgotten his tiredness during the excitement of the battle; now, sitting his horse beside the tall conestogas, reaction set in and the officer felt completely exhausted. With a strong effort he held himself erect as the emigrants crawled out of the prairie-schooners.

"We're sure obliged to you, Lieutenant. If'n you hadn't come along, I've a notion we'd 'a been done fer."

Lee Russell looked solemnly at the tall, lean teamster who spoke. The man was hard-looking and dirty, with a heavy auburn beard that covered almost all of his face. Evidently the beard was his pride and joy because, while his trousers and shapeless jacket were marred with ingrained dirt and axlegrease, his beard showed evidence of much care and combing. The officer felt an inner dislike for the sinewy freighter.

"Where are you bound?"

The teamster grinned ingratiatingly, and showed white, even teeth through the background of thick beard. "We'-uns is jist a-travelin." He shrugged and leaned on his Hawkins rifle. "Immigrants you might say."

Russell looked over the four or five men and even in his tired state it dawned on him that there were no women or children among the 'emigrants'. A suspicion grew in his mind. "Well, if you're just traveling you surely have a destination in mind, haven't you?"

Again the tall man shrugged; but before he could open his mouth to reply a shorter, compactly-built man with small, slate grey eyes, and a slash for a mouth, muscled through the group and faced the mounted cavalryman. "We're bound fer Walnut Creek an' the tradin' post there, although I don't see as it's ary o' yore affair."

Russell turned his head slightly and looked down at the truculent speaker. "Mister, *anything* on the frontier is the Army's affair, if the Army chooses to make it so." The officer and the teamster exchanged long stares and open dislike was plain on both faces.

The man with the auburn beard laughed uneasily. "Ain't no call to get sore." He smiled at Russell. "You'll have to excuse Lem, Lieutenant; he's a might upset over them hostiles a-jumpin' us."

Russel re-grouped his troop, examined the injured, of which there were seven—but none seriously hurt, and aligned them on each side of the wagons on the return trip to Fort Walker.

Lee was frankly puzzled by several things. In the first place, the wagonmen hadn't been overly grateful for the Army's interference in their battle; in the second place, if they were emigrants as they claimed, it was the first time he had seen emigrants without their families. And why were they so evasive about their destination?

The lieutenant was turning these things over in his mind when Sergeant Ludwig rode up beside him. He turned to his striker. "Sergeant, you've been out here eight years; did you ever run across emigrants caravanning without their families before?"

The Sergeant shook his head slowly. "Dese men is nod emigrants, Lieutenant."

Russell raised his eyebrows. "I

don't think so myself, Sergeant, but what makes you so sure?"

Ludwig grunted. "Lieutenant, dem vagons vas moofing ven attacked dey vas. De dracks vas plain behind de vagons, but dey ended right vere attacked dey vas—vhich means dot dey don't efen haf durned around or got off der trail do make der camp." The Sergeant shook his head negatively. "Dem emigrants vas traveling at night, which means dey aindt emigrants at all, but maybe freighters, an' den de vomen und kids dey don't haf mit."

2

THE SUN was just breaking over the horizon when B troop wound its way back into Fort Walker. The emigrants were left outside the Fort by orders of the commanding officer, who allowed no civilian wagons on the military reservation. Lee Russell dismissed his troop and he noticed, with a twinge of resentment against the new captain who had ordered him out the night before, that his men's faces were drawn and grey with dark, shallow patches beneath their eyes. When B troop had fallen out, Russell turned his weary mount over to Sergeant Ludwig, and headed for the log house that was combination home and office for the commanding officer, Colonel Goodan.

Colonel Goodan had an enviable Civil War record but now he was old—too old; he stayed on at Fort Walker because of a military system that kept men on active duty long past their physical ability to perform the duties of their positions. He smiled, nodded at Lieutenant Russell, and motioned the weary officer to a chair. Russell accepted, despite the frown of Captain Fury, clean and freshly-shaven, standing beside Colonel Goodan's desk. *Protocol and regulations be damned,* Russell thought; *I've earned the right to sit.*

"Well, Lieutenant, what happened?" Russell ignored the captain and faced the colonel.

"We were on the Overland Trail, about fourteen miles from the Fort near our turn-off, when we heard firing. We investigated and found three emigrant wagons under attack. We relieved 'em, routed the hostiles, an' escorted 'em here. They are camped outside the Fort now."

Captain Fury, conscious of Russell's animosity, was smiling smugly but his eyes held an intent, interested gleam. "Why didn't you send back a courier?"

Lieutenant Russell arose and faced the Captain. "I did, sir; in fact, I sent back two."

Fury's smile was edged with dislike. "I was on duty, Lieutenant, and no trooopers from B troop reported in."

Russell's anger was softened by surprise. "Are you sure?"

The captain's face reddened and his smile faded. "Are you suggesting that I wasn't on my post, Lieutenant?"

Lee Russell's eyes flamed and anger coursed through his veins. "Listen, Captain; if you don't like me we can settle that between ourselves at our own convenience, but you'd better learn that out here on the frontier we have to operate as a team or we're going to get wiped out. I am *not* insinuating that you were not on post at all; but I *am* interested in what became of my two couriers."

Fury's face was livid and he took two steps toward Russell. Colonel Goodan, surprised and angered, pushed himself to his feet. "Gentlemen, gentlemen! Remember where you are!" The two officers straightened into attention at their superior's words, but their eyes remained locked in challenge.

The colonel pushed his shoulders

back with visible effort and his watery blue eyes glared at the junior officers. "Gentlemen, we have a deadly foe to vanquish and we'll not do it by fighting among ourselves." He faced Captain Fury. "Daniel, are you certain that couriers from B troop did not report in at the Fort?" The captain nodded stiffly. Colonel Goodan sat down stiffly. "Then, Lieutenant, I am confident that your men never reached the Fort; possibly they were ambushed." The colonel's eyes assumed their weary look. "Go get some rest Lieutenant; you've certainly earned it." Russell saluted and left the room, rancor heavy in his chest.

B TROOP turned to in full compiement for retreat and mess. They were freshly-shaven, bathed and fed; and, except for slow-burning resentment, they appeared none the worse for their sixteen hours in the saddle and their skirmish with the night-raiders.

Sergeant Ludwig and Lieutenant Russell sat in the latter's hutment and played checkers. It wasn't orthodox; but on the frontier, army discipline was pretty much left to the discretion of the officers themselves, as each troop had to operate as a team; and Lee Russell was known to be lax in this respect.

"Dose vagons left aboud noon."

Russell looked up from the checkerboard; he had forgotten about the teamsters "Dammit. I meant to go out an' have another talk with those men."

The Sergeant nodded slowly. "Somding vas funny alridt Corporal Monahan vas on der gate ven dey bulled oudt, und he said dey vas all at vonce in a hurry."

Lee Russell made a move that cost him two black ovals which Sergeant Ludwig took greedily.

"We should have searched those wagons."

The Sergeant shrugged. "Vot could ve haf found?"

Russell made a move, baiting a trap for the sergeant. "Damned if I know; but maybe we could have gotten an idea about the men, or some lead on why they traveled at night." Ludwig ignored Russell's trap, feinted with a red oval, drew Russell into a trap of his own and jumped a man. Lieutenant Russell frowned. "Damn you Otto, here I am trying to figure out the mystery of those freighters an' you're robbing me blind."

The Sergeant laughed shortly. "Vot stumps me is vot to our couriers happened."

Russell's eyes clouded. "Well, like Colobel Goodan said, they were probably ambushed on their way to the Fort."

Ludwig nodded. "Ja, I dink zo mineself; but dot means hostiles vas behind us as vell as in der front, too; und I didn't see no sign of dot. If dey vas trailing us, den dey had goot reason; und maybe dey knew vot vas in de vagons und vanted it pretty bad." Lieutenant Russell was about to answer when an urgent bugle-blast cut into the still night; both men jumped to their feet and dashed outside.

Lieutenant Russell loped across the parade-ground, toward a little knot of men on the porch of Colonel Goodan's command post. When Lee came up, the colonel turned to face him and his face looked very old in the flat, white light. "Lieutenant, this man here," jutting a gnarled thumb in the direction of a buckskin-clad frontiersman, "rode over from Walnut Creek and he says the hostiles are attacking the settlement and the ranches over there." Russell turned to the stranger. The man's face was covered by a two-days growth of beard and his eyes were squinted from long habit. At his belt hung a heavy Kiowa-Apache scalping knife in a beaded sheath, with a tiny scalplock of coarse black hair suspended from the bottom of it. A shiny Colt's Navy pistol was shoved into his broad, mahogany-colored belt and the fringed shirt and trousers were offset by bead encrusted moccasins.

"How did you come here?"

"I was comin' to the settlement from the mountains to get rid of some furs, an' I first seen a band of bronco Apaches trottin' through the hills toward Walnut Creek an' they was armed to the teeth. I hid out an' watched fer a spell, an' directly I seen fires springin' up at the outlyin' ranches; then I heard gunfire, an' after a bit I seen what looked like the whole damned settlement bust out in flames. By then the firin' was almost deafenin', even as far away as I was. I figgered I'd do better by comin' over to the Fort then by gettin' into the scrap, so I cached my furs an' rode like hell fer Fort Walker." The man shrugged his head. "If'n you fellers don't get to horse they ain't goin' to be nothin' much left by the time you get over there."

Colonel Goodan put a hand on Captain Fury's sleeve. "Captain, take A and F troops and relieve the Walnut Creek settlement at once." Fury saluted smartly and ordered the bugler to sound the call to arms.

FOR THE second time in two days, Fort Walker was the scene of furious nightly preparations for the field. A and F troops were to horse in less time than it takes to tell about it; the excitement of their destination spreading like wildfire throughout the Fort, and with a bellow from Captain Fury, they thundered out of the Fort, and with a bellow from the Fort, swung Southeastward and were swallowed up by the night.

Lieutenant Russell watched Fury's detachment go out the massive gates with mixed emotions. He had wanted to be along the first time the new captain went into combat. He was still staring after the troops when Colonel Goodan walked up beside him. The old man was more stooped than usual and his face was somber. "Lieutenant, sometimes I wonder if a man can ever stop fighting."

Russell felt a twinge of pity for the tired old soldier beside him and he glimpsed himself, reflected in the colonel, after twenty or thirty years in the service. "I don't think so, Colonel. Men will always fight. They may talk and dream of peace and plan for it, but inside they all know peace is an illusion and there never will be peace."

Colonel Goodan looked up in surprise. "You're quite a philosopher Lieutenant."

Russell shook his head "No sir, not a philosopher—just a realist."

The colonel smiled wanly. "Well, Lee, I've known that what you just said is the truth for over fifty years, but until tonight I've never admitted it—even to myself." He clasped his hands behind his back and looked out over the still night landscape. "It doesn't make a pretty picture, does it?"

The Lieutenant shook his head. "No, sir; it doesn't."

Colonel Goodan scratched his cheek and shrugged. "Well, Lee, to get back to the present situation—you'll take your own B troop as well as D troop and start after Fury at sun-up."

Russell faced his commander. "That'll only leave C troop at the Fort, sir."

Colonel Goodan smiled. "But don't forget the three gattling guns, Lieuenant; they're worth a troop in firepower." Lee Russell nodded and saluted. The colonel returned the salute and watched the lieutenant walk off, satisfaction and approval in his sunken eyes.

●

Sergeant Ludwig was waiting when Russell returned. He had heard the news of the attack on Walnut Creek. The two men stood and talked for several minutes under the overhanging eaves of the officer's quarters.

"You might as well pass the word along, Sergeant, that B and D troops will turn out at reveille to take the field. We're to follow Fury's force as

reserve and mop-up troops." The Sergeant nodded as he yawned.

"Vell, at least ve don't in der middle of der night go again, anyvay."

Russell grinned at the insinuation. "No, but if Fury had had his way I'll bet you we'd be on our way to the settlement right now instead of A and F troops."

Ludwig frowned slightly. "Vot's wrong, mit dot captain anyway?"

Russell shrugged. "Search me, Sergeant; but since the first day he came onto the reservation he's had it in for me, for some reason." The lieutenant smiled sourly. "Of course I haven't done anything to make him like me, either."

The sergeant pulled his gauntlets out of his belt and thoughtfully pushed his broad hands into them. "Vell, vhen de officers each udder don't like, id's sure hard on de men."

Russell laughed and slapped Ludwig roughly on the shoulder. "See you at sunup sergeant, ready to ride."

BEFORE THE light of a new day broke over the Fort, troopers were busy getting their gear ready. Reveille found few men of either B or D troops asleep; as soon as mess was over the men were lined up, inspected, given formal orders and marched off.

Riding at a slow lope, B and D troops hunched forward in their saddles to offset as much as possible the cold of an early autumn morning. Lieutenant Russell rode in the lead as usual with Sergeant Ludwig directly behind him. The only stranger with the troops was the frontiersman who had stayed the night at Fort Walker, having no stomach for night-fighting, and who now rode stirrup with Lieutenant Russell.

The Lieutenant was curious about his new companion and studied the man out of the corner of his eye. "Are you a trapper?"

The man rubbed a calloused hand along his unshaven jaw. "Not exactly; I'm a kind of an explorer. I trap when the trappin' is good an' just poke around the back country when it aint."

Russell digested this thoughtfully. "Do you know where the hostiles hold their tiswin drunks?"

The man nodded curtly. "Sure. Lots of Mountain Men know them spots; in fact, most of us has been on a bender or two with the Injuns."

Russell faced the man as their mounts loped along in the clear, rose-ate early morning light. "Would you scout an army detachment to them?"

The man in buckskin looked across at the officer in sharp amazement. "You'd get massacred unless you was to outnumber 'em ten to one."

Russell shrugged. "We could do that too, if we knew how many there would be."

The frontiersman shook his head. "Nope, on secon' thought I don't allow I'd do it. 'Couldn't no good come of it, an' a helluva lot of bad would sure crop up. Nope, I ain't yore man fer that job."

Russell dropped his conversation with the Mountain Man. It was an idea of his that if the Army could catch the hostiles at one of their tiswin drunks it could break the back of Apache resistence once and for all. He was wrong, but since he never had the

opportunity to put his scheme into operation, he never knew it.

●

Walnut Creek was a small settlement along an all-year creek of good fresh water, where a number of rich ranches had sprung up. The settlement itself was no more than a large log trading-post, with a blacksmithing shop attached; a rough slab-sided saloon called *The Bounty,* six or eight log buildings that housed either employees of the trading-post, or other tradesmen of the village—such as horse-traders, trappers and livestock-dealers; and freighters with their mounds of axles, wheels, replacement parts for their great wagons, and the wagons themselves.

Lieutenant Russell heard the noise of battle while his troop was still quite a way from the settlement. He stood in his stirrups and looked ahead. There was a billowing cloud of smoke, black and oily, rising over Walnut Creek. The closer the cavalrymen got to their destination the louder the roar of battle became. Apparently fighting had been in progress all night, and was still raging with all the fury that marked Indian warfare.

There was no quarter given or asked; generally speaking, an Indian war was fought with the stubborn, unreasoning deadliness that knew no truce, no armistice and no peace—until one side—often both—was so decimated and exhausted that it could no longer fight.

Coming into sight of the burning village, Russell was horrified to see that all of the buildings—with the lone exception of the trading-post—were burning furiously. Apparently, those settlers who had been able, had made it into the trading-post and were making their stand there.

Confusion and dense smoke swirled with every change of a vagrant breeze, and marked what once had been a beautiful, picturesque little hamlet in the partly cleared meadow land of Walnut Creek.

Lee Russell deployed his men and charged into what remained of Walnut Creek settlement. The cavalrymen unsheathed their sabers and hurriedly, nervously, tucked the flaps of their revolvers under their belts behind the butts of their heavy pistols. With a scream that was equal in wildness and ferocity to anything the hostiles could offer, Russell and his veterans swept down into the melee, with the outraged and vengeful wrath of old campaigners coming to grips once more with their sworn and hated enemies.

3

CAPTAIN FURY'S troopers were firing from a hundred vantage-points, their faces drawn and smoke-streaked. The arrival of Russell's troops helped morale, but the fight was not over by a long sight.

Afoot, their horses abandoned to whatever fate lay in wait, B and D troops ran for cover, leaping over the bodies of Apaches, settlers—men and women, and occasionally a child.

The hostiles were in force—much greater force than the army had reason to expect. Russell studied the hiding places of the braves, and was surprised to see that not only were Chiricahuas among the enemy, but also Mescaleros and Tres Pinos. Too, there were hostiles that he couldn't place at all, their dress being altogether foreign to Apache apparel. Suddenly the grim and amazing facts unfolded to him and he turned to Sergeant Ludwig.

"Sergeant, this is some kind of a hostile confederacy; we've got a real battle on our hands."

The Sergeant, carbine in hand and kneeling behind an upturned freight-wagon squinted at the wraithlike In-

dians slipping among the ruins and the brush out on the meadow.

"I noticed somding doo, when running for cofer I vas." He pointed at the stiff form of an Apache killed the night before. "De rifles de hostiles has got is already der latest repeating block guns. Dose guns is brand new, Lieutenant, brand new."

Lee Russell stared at the fallen brave's rifle and a sick feeling hit him in the pit of the stomach. Someone was bringing the latest repeating-rifles to the Indians. It had to be a white man; an Indian couldn't buy one. His eyes moved slowly over the crumpled forms of the dead and stopped on the upturned face of a tiny girl with baby-blue eyes, a piquant freckled little nose and a rose-bud mouth, her auburn hair a coppery shroud around her.

Russell stared in fascination at the little girl's hair. It was auburn, the same color as the beard of the teamster who had been attacked out on the Overland Trail two nights before. Russell knelt beside Sergeant Ludwig. "Otto, I'll tell you what was in those wagons we escorted."

The Sergeant was shocked by the wild look in his superior's eyes. "The wagons had rifles in them, Sergeant, brand new rifles for the Apaches—repeating rifles to kill settlers." His arm pointed stiffly at the little girl. "Quick-firing rifles to do things like that with."

Ludwig grabbed Russell's arm. His face was harsh. "Get aholt on yourself Lieutenant. Effen you vas right, ve a fight still haf; man, get aholt on yourself."

Lee Russell, white faced and shaking, lowered his eyes. "You're right, Otto. It was that little body in the foreground.

The Sergeant nodded and swallowed. "I know," he said with simple dignity; "I saw dot alzo."

Lieutenant Russell crawled over the hot, seared earth toward a group of troopers firing from behind two dead horses. The ripping slash of a bullet tearing it's way into one of the animals made him drop flat. "Keep your heads down boys; keep your heads down!"

The troopers glanced at him briefly. "Lieutenant, we got a war on our hands." Russell risked a look over the bulwark of brown hair.

"Yes, an' those devils have repeating rifles—so don't take any chances, because they don't have to reload like we do." The soldiers looked at one another, white-faced, and a corporal Russell recognised as belonging to A troop voiced their thoughts.

"You ain't tellin' us nothin' we haven't known since we pulled onto the field last night, Lieutenant; an' we think they must've gotten them guns from a white man."

Russell nodded. "Unless I'm wrong, Corporal, they got 'em from those three wagons B troop brought in night before last." The soldiers swore obscenely, and their jaw-muscles rippled beneath their sweat and grime streaked faces.

SERGEANT LUDWIG found two dead troopers from A or F troop behind a gutted sheep-shed. He looked at the four dog-tired soldiers still alive. "You fellows with Captain Fury come last night?"

One of the soldiers nodded and his eyes were red and deep in his head. "Yeah, but we ain't seen the captain since we hit the settlement." A deafening thunder of rifle-fire broke out

and the Sergeant instinctively flattened out on the ground. He could see the dense brush along the creek from between logs that had the chinking knocked out. There were hundreds of half-naked bodies writhing and sneaking among the cover. He poked his Sharp's carbine through a hole, aimed at a partially-hidden brave whose flat face was snuggled low over the stock of a brand new repeating-rifle, and squeezed the trigger. The carbine bucked and roared, its report lost in the deafening thunder of close combat, and the victim jumped straight up out of his hiding-place, stood erect for a full two seconds, then crashed head-first into the hard earth. The Sergeant smiled to himself as he reloaded.

A and F troops were badly cut up. Slipping and crawling from one cover to the next, a boot-heel shot off and two holes in his trousers, Russell searched in vain for Captain Fury. None of the troopers who had ridden with the captain had seen him since the army had come to the village. The lieutenant assumed that the captain had been killed in the opening engagement, and appointed several non-commissioned officers of A and F companies to take over under him. There was little need for army regulating, however, and the Lieutenant knew it; this was a fight to the death and each man was for himself. But in order to maintain some sort of discipline, should the need arise later, Russell nevertheless made the appointments.

•

Two hours later, the fighting was just as ferocious and undecided as it had been all night. The hostiles were fanned out, however, after finding that by concentrating their forces along the creek they were being cut to ribbons by the reinforced soldiers. Now, instead of fighting only a frontal battle, the troopers suddenly found the wary braves slipping around behind them, and picking off exposed troopers from the rear. Blue-clad cavalry men ran frantically for new cover, something that would protect both front and rear at the same time. Here and there the darting figures would crumple under the accurate and withering fire of the hostiles.

Lee Russell lay behind a small pile of firewood with a broken oaken barrel behind him, leaving only his long legs exposed. Firing methodically and with deadly marksmanship, the Lieutenant sought out targets in comparative security. Through squinted eyes he watched a short, squat man motion to another hostile and point to a cluster of burned-out logs that once had been a small house. The two spoke briefly for a moment, then the summoned hostile slipped away among the brushy growth, evidently to carry out an order.

Russell's face drew into an expression of exultation and blind hatred as he rested his carbine on a flat rock, took deliberate aim, pulled the trigger and looked up. The Apache, apparently some kind of a leader, was hit in the side near the ribs by the officer's bullet, and the force of the slug knocked him violently backward; he lay threshing, clutching at his side where a gaping, ragged hole was pouring out blood onto the dry earth.

Lee Russell smiled grimly, and his teeth were white beneath flattened lips; it was good to kill when there was need. He felt the surging pulsation of hot blood through his body, and his narrowed eyes sought another target.

The dying man was jerking spasmodically when a sweat-streaked young buck darted out of the brush,

grasped him by the shoulders and tugged him to safety among the buckbrush and mesquite. The younger man's eyes were large and somber as he watched the older warrior gasp out his last breath; he arose into a crouching position and began a relentless, stalking advance toward Russell's place of concealment.

THE SETTLERS in the trading-post were giving a good account of themselves. They had an indisputable advantage over the exposed soldiers; from every shattered window and door, from cunningly whittled loop holes and cracks between the logs where the chinking had been knocked out, rifles bristled

The hostiles had tried to storm the building twice; both times, they had been repulsed with mounting losses. Dead braves lay under the windows and across the long porch of the building, but none had succeeded in gaining entrance. The Indians had tried to fire the building, but that had failed, too; giving up direct assault, the deadly children of the desert had retired to places of concealment, where they could fire on the building—but they seldom got a good target. With the coming of Fury's command the Indians had unleashed all of their pent-up rancor on the soldiers, with devastating results.

Running, sliding and crawling, Sergeant Ludwig had made what he thought was a fairly complete round of the trooper's posts. He had been shocked and horrified at what remained of Fury's two troops. Dead cavalrymen were everywhere, torn scalps evidence that the hostiles had been counting coup all night long.

Suddenly, from behind an overturned out-house, the sergeant and a startled Apache ran almost into one another's arms. Both men stood transfixed for a long second in complete surprise; then, like striking snakes they brought up their guns. In the fleeting fraction of a second before the hostile fired, Sergeant Ludwig recognised the heavy dragoon pistol in the Indian's fist as belonging to a trooper and he jerked the trigger of his own gun. The Indian's revolver went off, missed the sergeant the fraction of an inch, inches as the hostile swung abruptly away from the Ludwig in a half arc, then collapsed in a heap. For no particular reason, except that he resented seeing a brave with some dead trooper's pistol, Ludwig bent over and picked up the revolver from the hostile's dead hand. The unconscious movement saved his life; as he bent over, the Apache who had been stalking Russell's hiding-place couldn't resist the temptation, and fired at Ludwig's back.

The Indian's bullet smacked into a thick plank on the old out-house and Sergeant Ludwig dropped flat, trying to squirm around to face his adversary as he fell.

Lieutenant Russell, attention drawn to the little drama by the closeness of the hostile's shot, swung around and in a glance saw the Apache raising his shiny new rifle for another shot at the desperately squirming sergeant; he threw his pistol in a flashing arc and thumbed two rapid shots at the exposed Indian. Neither shot took effect, which the officer hadn't expected, anyway; but they did startle the brave enough for his own shot to go wild. The Apache swung around and tossed his rifle to his shoulder when he saw Russell; but Sergeant Ludwig, taking careful and deliberate aim, fired once and the Indian fell forward without sound or movement.

The Indians were leaving. Lieutenant Russell noticed the slackening of the firing from the creek and the brush around the settlement before he actually saw the Indians slinking to their gaudily-decorated horses, mounting and riding off with their shiny repeating rifles. He bellowed like an enraged bull for his troopers to concentrate on the enemy's horses; but the range was too great, and the feasibility of advancing over the cleared land toward the hostile mounts was suicide. So, in helpless fury, the lieutenant had to lie

there and watch the hostiles ride away.

BY LATE afternoon the dead had been assembled in one place, identified, and covered with great dirty slabs of canvas taken off the few ruined wagons around the settlement that had escaped burning. The battered defenders came from within the trading-post and assembled in dogged and grim silence as civilian casualties were counted and recorded in Lieutenant Russell's little black book.

There were hysterical, choking sobs from women, and gaunt, dry moans from men. The scene was well-calculated to bring lumps to the hardest throats among the veteran campaigners and many an eye was feverish as the story was told by Ephriam Callahan, the owner of the trading post.

"We was just finishin' the day's business last evenin' when the devils attacked. They had been hangin' around all day, in larger numbers than usual, an' we was a might uneasy, then in come three Conestogas in charge of some freighters we never sc before. The wagons went directly to the Injun camp down in the willows near the creek, where a lot of noise was goin' on." The storekeeper shook his head slowly, as though to erase a bitter memory before he continued.

"Them Injuns was still on their tiswin an' were awful noisy. We could see the teamsters doin' a lot of tradin' an' arguin' with them; then, all of a sudden, the Injuns jumped into the wagons an' began passin' out brand new repeatin' rifles. I told my hired man to round up the folks in the settlement an' come into the store, for I figgered we was in fer trouble. Two of them renegade freighters come arunnin' up here after they fought clear of the Injuns and I let 'em in—I wanted 'em as prisoners." The man shook his greying head again and his tired, red rimmed eyes looked unseeingly into Lieutenant Russell's face.

"You know the rest of it, Lieutenant. A couple of troops of cavalry hit the settlement about ten oclock last night an' their captain rode right up to the store an' took the two teamsters out. That's the last we seen of 'em."

A woman with a lock of jet black hair hanging forlornly from beneath her bonnet stepped up. "No it ain't, Ephriam; I seen them two men grab horses an' mount up, then they rode off in a dead run with that soldier feller with 'em." The woman wagged a finger under Russell's nose. "An' they went West, young man, away from the settlement an' away from the direction of Fort Walker!"

Lieutenant Russell was nonplussed. After his cursory search for Captain Fury, he had assumed the man had been killed and had looked no further. Now the implication behind the woman's words and actions regarding the senior officer left him but one conclusion to draw. Captain Fury, somehow, had been tied in with the teamsters who had brought the guns to the hostiles. "Did one of the freighters have a thick auburn beard."

The woman nodded vehemently. "Yep, one had a red beard an' the other one was dark, like a Mexican or a 'breed." She nodded again. "An' they both rode off with that officer." Lee Russell questioned several other settlers and each told the same story. Having been in the trading-post, most of them had seen the entire episode.

§ 4 §

IT WAS a gloomy, grim procession of cavalrymen who wound their way back towards Fort Walker. The ragged remnants of A and F troops led a large band of saddled, riderless horses, while B and D troops carried vast loads of gear taken from fallen comrades. There wasn't a word said and the setting sun, red and swollen, shone dully on the line of

grimy, tattered and exhausted troopers.

Lee Russell, numb with exhaustion and grief rode slumped forward in his saddle, his thoughts black and shot through with despair. Sergeant Ludwig looked at his superior with somber eyes with a glint of steel in their outraged depths. "Ve should go after him."

Russell nodded mechanically.

"Id's der first time effer I heard of such a ding." The sergeant was a long time getting over the initial shock of finding out that Captain Fury was a renegade. "In der army such dings don't happen."

When the badly-mauled blue column rode through silent guard on the gate at Fort Walker, an orderly called Colonel Goodan. The commanding officer watched the troops line up in horror. He walked out to Lieutenant Russell as the junior officer dismissed the men. "What happened, Lieutenant? Good Lord, man, the troops are only half here."

Russell looked into the commander's eyes. "There aren't any more coming, Colonel; that's all that's left."

"Was it an ambush?"

"No, Sir; it was a battle against a hostile confederacy of some kind, and the Indians were armed with brand new repeating rifles." Russell's pent-up emotions broke through the flood gates of his military reserve, and, in a torrent of profanity he told the Colonel the story of Captain Fury's treachery.

In the command post Colonel Goodan sat slumped over his littered table vacant-eyed and very small. Russell felt acute pity, but, there was nothing he could do or say. "This is the end for me, Lieutenant." Goodan shook his head as though to clear his thinking-processes. "After a lifetime in the service, disaster has found me out here on the frontier."

Russell raised his eyes from the floor. "Colonel, let me take my striker and a squad of men. I'll bring him back." The colonel nodded abstractly.

"Yes, Lieutenant; yes indeed. Go after him. Bring him back here, dead or alive, but bring him back. At least we can salvage the regiment's honor by executing him ourselves."

When Russell left Colonel Goodan's office, the old man was still sitting at his desk, nodding his head gently in the gloom of early evening, his eyes staring straight ahead but seeing nothing—unless it was the ghostly spectres of his long years as a soldier, marching down the corridor of time until they halted in the disgrace of what had happened at Walnut Creek.

Lee Russell passed the word to Sergeant Ludwig, who in turn picked out four men he knew as old campaigners and staunch career-soldiers, and who had also been at Walnut Creek. They made up their packs, silently, looked to their arms, then turned in and got a full night's sleep because, as Ludwig bluntly told them, no one knew when they would get to sleep again—unless it was "nefer to avaken."

AT DAWN, under the approving stares of their regiment, Lee Russell, Otto Ludwig and four lean troopers trotted stiffly out the gates of Fort Walker. They were back in shambles of Walnut Creek by early morning.

Asking questions everywhere he thought might be uncovered that he could use, Russell and his squad canvassed the stunned settlement thoroughly. The only man who had shrewdly thought out the captain's position was the same buckskin-clad Mountain Man who had ridden to Walnut Creek with B and D troops

the day before. Russell noticed three new drying hanks of hair tied to his knife-sheath as he talked to the man.

"I figger the hostiles was too drunk to hold to their bargain of buyin' the guns, Lieutenant, an' jist naturally jumped this here captain's freighters, took the guns, then run amok." Lee nodded impatiently. He had all this figured out for himself.

"But where could they go," He couldn't bring himself to refer to Fury by his army title.

The buckskin clad man shrugged. "A hundred places, providin' they didn't lose their scalps whilst they was goin' there. In fac', if'n I was in this here captain's boots, I'd head South into Mexico. It's a cinch he don't dare go near any whites an' the Injuns'll kill him out of hand, because he ain't no use to them no longer."

Lieutenant Russell thought over Fury's plight and was inclined to agree with the deductions of the Mountain Man. He summoned Sergeant Ludwig, rounded up his squad of enlisted men and they left Walnut Creek on the Overland Trail, heading Southwest into the new day.

The day was far spent when a vidette Lieutenant Russell had posted to ride a mile or so ahead, came loping back. He reported a large band of foreign hostiles crossing the Trail several miles ahead. Russell nodded. "After what happened to them yesterday they probably are going to wherever they came from." Sergeant Ludwig smiled sourly.

"Dey haf had enough. Dey lost a lod of men und didn't get nodding much for it bud a few scalps."

The vidette frowned and spoke in the drawl of Texas: "An' them new repeatin' rifles."

The little squad of soldiers rode off the trail and wound through the brush until they found a good spot protected by dense growth where they sat on their horses and watched the Indian band on the move. The bearing of the soldiers was straight backed and bitter. In their silence they drew only small satisfaction from the obviously dejected attitude of the decimated Indian band.

Nightfall found the troopers near enough Fort North to see the pale yellow lights shining over and through the barricade walls. They kept in the saddle and an hour or so later, after mess and retreat, arrived at the gate. After an introduction and an explanation of their errand, the troopers from Fort Walker were billetted for the night.

At Fort North a regularly-employed Indian Scout, by the name of Samuel Custer, volunteered to join the hunt for the renegade Captain Fury. Lieutenant Russell agreed after the scout pointed out that he alone among them knew the shortcuts and the Indian camps South to the border.

At sunup the troopers were astride and, with their new companion and guide, rode South on the trail until the sun was directly overhead. At the noon bivouac near a busy little creek, the cavalrymen made a meal while the scout turned his horse and descended the hill until he was out of sight, dismounted and crept back toward the crest where, lying prone, he watched two slow moving horsemen. They were Mescalero Apaches.

Custer jumped on his horse and rode back to camp. He told Russell of the oncoming Indians and the soldiers hastily hid in the willows along the creek bank until the Apaches were almost directly in front of them, then they rode out, pistols pointed navel high. The Apaches froze, realising that flight was synonomous with death.

IN CAMP, one of the Apaches proved to be a communicative fel-

low called Blue Bear. He was a Mescalero who had come West to join the Chiricahuas in a raid against a white settlement, where the hostiles were to be sold the latest repeating rifles. He told the white men that the tiswin drunk had made all of the Apaches eager to fight; and when an army officer told their leaders at Painted Rock that he would sell them rifles, the word spread. Soon the entire Apache nation, and several neighboring tribes, joined exultingly in the transaction.

Lieutenant Russell, through the scout, Custer, asked Blue Bear if he knew where the white army officer was. The Apache nodded; he had seen him in the company of two other white men riding South on the Overland Trail only that morning, many miles ahead. That settled it. Russell didn't want to send a man back to Fort North with the Indians, so he was forced to release them—which he did over the savage and growling protests of the scout, who wanted to execute them then and there. Russell read similar sentiments on the faces of his troopers and managed to save the Indians only by ordering an immediate breakup of camp.

The Apaches rode away from the bivouac without a backward glance, but they kept right on loping their horses just in case the whites changed their minds. The soldiers rode hard behind the scout, who suddenly turned off the trail and struck a narrow, dusty game trail through a narrow canyon. "It'll cut miles off the reg'lar trail."

At sundown, the cavalrymen and their fringed companion were in a maze of brush-covered hills. The scout assured them that by noon on the following day they would be ahead of their prey. They ate a dry supper because they were in a hostile country and didn't dare make a fire. They didn't sleep, either; but they could and did rest their horses. The night hour went by slowly for the lounging men. Talk was held to a minimum, as an added precaution, although the scout told them he doubted if there were any hostiles in the immediate neighborhood; their dry camp was far south of the general route of travel the Apaches used between United States territory and Mexico.

While the stars were still high in the heavens, the little party saddled up and rode slowly behind the scout, who picked his way carefully down the narrow trail. This was poor country to lame or cripple a horse in; many dangerstudded miles lay between a white man and help.

When the daylight hours had crept over the cold land, the searching party was again on a well defined roadway that led into Mexico. After several hours of hard riding and studying the tracks over which they rode, the scout called a halt near a clump of stunted pines. The men unsaddled and hobbled their horses. They were weary and cold and the sun felt good on their tired bodies.

Lieutenant Russell squatted in the shade under a ragged old pine near the scout. "Are you pretty sure they haven't gone by us?"

The scout was industriously pushing tobacco out of a beaded pouch into an old pipe. "Yep. The only way they could'a got ahead o' us was if they rode all night, an' I didn't see no fresh sign on the trail that'd tell us they did." He popped the pipe into his mouth and sucked on it, unlit. He smiled at the Lieutenant's puzzled look. "I seldom light it on the trail; smoke's too strong. Injuns might smell it, an' as well as I like to smoke, I like my hair better."

When the sun was straight overhead, Russell sent a scouting trooper afoot up to a low hill that commanded a back view of the trail. The man came back almost instantly and reported four horsemen coming at a trot down the trail. One, he said, was an Indian; the other three were white.

Custer grunted and picked up his repeating rifle. "That'll be our men. Probably got an Injun confederate along to guide 'em.". He shrugged eloquently and casually. "So much the better."

Lieutenant Russell passed the word that he wanted Fury alive, and both the teamsters too, if possible. The troopers faded into the shadows of the brush and trees. The scout and Sergeant Ludwig took up position partly in hiding, rifles in the crooks of their arms, deceptively relaxed looking.

When the riders hove into view Russell recognized Fury and the teamster with the auburn beard. The other man was the short, belligerent freighter who had told him to mind his own business the first night he had seen them. The officer smiled grimly and his hand hovered talon-like over his pistol-butt. When the riders saw the lone soldier in the middle of the trail they stopped and stared, then urged their horses forward at a slow walk.

Lieutenant Russell looked hard at the ex-Captain, who had sloughed off his uniform and had donned fringed buckskins. "Fury, I've been waiting for you."

Daniel Fury, whatever else he was, was no coward. "How did you get here."

Russell shrugged. "What difference does it make? I'm here, and I'm going to take you back to Fort Walker, either astride or feet-first."

Fury laughed in a short, nasty way and turned to his companions. "Shall I kill him with my pistol or my knife?"

The bearded teamster had none of Fury's confidence; he was plain scared, and showed it. With a slow, deliberate movement he raised his pistol toward Russell. A low-pitched voice broke in on the tense scene. The scout, Custer, had his carbine aimed at the teamster. "Drop it renegade, or I'll shoot your yellow carcass in two."

The mounted men jerked around in surprise and saw the rifle-barrels protruding from the brush on their right. The Apache chose that moment to make a break for it; but before his horse had gotten into its stride, he was plucked off its back by winged fingers of lead, and lay still on the desert floor.

Fury sat like a statue. Russell grinned wolfishly. "You didn't think I was alone, did you?"

The renegade's face lost it's tense look. "No, I reckon I shouldn't have, but tell me—just how in hell did you get here so fast?"

Russell pointed to the lounging scout. "Mister Custer there knows every shortcut in this godforsaken country."

Fury glanced contemptuously at his dead guide. "An' that liar said *he* knew the fastest way to get here." He cleared his throat and spat. "We even had a day's start on you. All right, Lieutenant, you've got us; let's get back an' get it over with."

RUSSELL looked wide-eyed at his prisoner. "Why did you do it?" The renegade grunted disgustedly. "For gold; what other reason would a man have? I met these freighters in Santa Fe. They told me how easy it would be, an' how much the hostiles would pay in Mexican gold for the repeating rifles." He shrugged his shoulders. "But the damned fools forgot about it bein' tiswin time an' that they'd be too drunk to trust; we not only lost our rifles, an' our chances of stayin' concealed, but I expect we'll lose our lives as well."

Russell had a picture in his mind

of a little girl with a tiny, piquant freckled nose lying stiff in death, a bullet in her chest. "Didn't you think of the settlers?"

The renegade army officer's eyes flashed blisteringly. "Sure I thought of 'em. You damned fool—if it wasn't for them, the hostiles wouldn't need our guns."

The cold-bloodedness of the man swept over Russell in a flash of understanding. Before he thought he swung his arm through the air with vicious force and Fury's head snapped backwards. The renegade held his hand over his torn mouth and glared balefully at Russell.

"Fury, I've never liked commanding an execution-squad, but I'm living for the day I'll command yours. It's renegades like you, who sell out your birthright and your country, that are adding children's scalps to Indian coup sticks. There's nothing lower on earth than a renegade; even an Apache wouldn't stoop to the things you've done."

Few words passed between the soldiers and their prisoners as they returned to Fort North. The scout, Custer, left them there and they continued on alone to Fort Walker, where they reported in with their captives, exactly four days to the hours from the time they left.

Daniel Fury was first court-martialled and drummed out of the army; then he was tried as a civilian, subject to military law, along with his two henchmen; sentenced to death for treason, and executed, all in the same day.

With a pale face but a determined set to his jaw, Lieutenant Russell saw the renegades tied to three pine saplings, listened to Fury's taunts, ordered the firing squad: "Ready—Aim—Fire!" The body of Daniel Fury, fairly weighted down with the murderous lead of the enraged soldiers, sagged limply against the ropes that held him to his execution piller.

★

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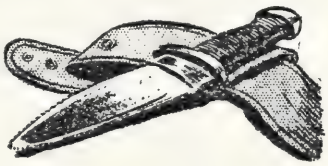

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SHE CLOSED the door carefully behind her and slid the bolt into place.

"You're a fool, Sharon Forest Emmons," she said aloud to herself as she hurriedly crossed the room to the single window. Momentarily, her slightly-uptilted nose was flattened against the glass as she stared out at the muddy, deserted main street.

Over the entrance of the Paragon Hotel a sodden, makeshift banner dangled limply. The dim light that filtered into the night from the bar seemed to be washed away by the rain falling steadily, monotonously. The lettering wasn't legible, but Shar-

on knew the clumsily executed letters read *"Pinky Forest For Sheriff."*

The green windowshade was cracked and frayed along the edges. Sharon drew it down to the sill as a precaution against prying eyes. A plume of black smoke rose from the soot encrusted lamp chimney, then settled into a dim, flickering glow that cast eerie shadows about the untidy office.

Sharon shook her cape, then tossed it on a chair. She tucked her blouse into the top of her whipcord skirt. "Ouch," she exclaimed involuntarily, then laughed softly as she unfastened the large silver star that hung heavily against the firmness of her bosom.

"Sheriff of Paragon City," she read aloud the inscription on the badge. "A big joke. So these bunchgrassers figure'd they'd get a big laugh out of running their hashslinger for sheriff, did they? Thought they'd have fun with the idea of a woman riding herd over their shifty deals."

"Ain't had a sheriff since young Tex Emmons got shot by them bank robbers, Clem," Rush Cutter had said. There was no hint of sympathy in Cutter's voice, but Cutter wasn't one to indulge in any display of emotion, she decided at the time when she had overheard the manager of the Paragon Hotel and Bar discuss the forthcoming elections with Mayor Clem Harder.

"If we gotta have a sheriff, let's have a pretty one," snickered Harder. "That new redhead you got working for you would be a cinch to win; there ain't a cattle-stiff within fifty miles o' town who'd vote agin 'er." He slapped his thigh and guffawed raucously at the idea.

Sharon heard that much of the conversation as she brought them their coffee. And she remembered blushing as Mayor Harder added, "She' got more curves than Bent Grass Gulch and every one of them curves'll mean a vote. What the hell, Rush," Harder had added as he'd rolled a cigarette and licked it into shape, "we gotta give the voters somethin'. No joke—why don't we run her. If they don't get any law here 'cept what we want 'em to, they might as well get a laugh."

Later that same night Cutter had called Sharon into his office. "I'm running you for sheriff, Pinky," he said, addressing her by the nickname he'd tagged her with when she arrived in Paragon City three weeks before. It was typical of Cutter's arrogance that he hadn't asked her if she'd run; he'd told her he was running her.

"Course you'll get in. It's just sort of a gag, like, and then Harder and me'll tell you what you gotta do. Won't be much. Just look cute, mostly. We'll take care of the law and order end ourselves; naturally you'll keep on workin' here at the Paragon for me."

As he'd talked, Cutter hoisted his bulky six-foot frame from his desk chair and circled the desk.

Sharon had stood unmoving as Cutter approached her. She'd never taken a really close look at him before.

Cutter at one time had been a rider then switched to prospecting in Colorado and hit a pocket of loose gold, no lode, but enough to get him started with the hotel and bar. That was fifteen years ago and easy living had piled loose folds of flesh on Cutter's face. His lower lids sagged under his cold, emotionless grey eyes and the tiny pools of red that showed there put her in mind of a bloodhound.

She'd squirmed uncomfortably as Cutter circled her waist with one arm and patted her on the shoulder. The nostrils of his high-bridged nose distended as he cupped her chin and tilted her face upward.

Before she could object, his pendulous lips crushed against her tightly-drawn mouth. She hadn't struggled, but her lack of response cooled his ardor almost instantly. The tension of his arm around her waist relaxed. He stepped back grinning sheepishly as he dragged one hairy hand across his mouth in a mopping motion.

"That was just to seal our bargain. You play sheriff, Pinky. Do what Harder and me tell you, and there'll be a future for you here in Paragon. Who knows," he added smugly, "some-

time I might even decide to get hitched."

"I'll be glad to serve as sheriff, Mr. Cutter." She forced a smile. "And—who knows—perhaps I might decide to marry, too, sometime." She'd added under her breath as she walked from his office, "but not to a flabby, egotistical crook like you, Rush Cutter."

As opposition for Sharon, Cutter and Harder had Luke Linker's name added to the slate. For the vast majority of Paragon's citizens the joke was then a perfect one. Linker was the town character, harmless, but not overly bright; just the mention of the possibility of Luke serving as sheriff was sure to evoke gales of laughter from all listeners.

But the landslide Cutter had predicted for Sharon didn't occur. Yesterday Rand Fowler, new owner of the H-Bar-H presented a properly-executed petition to Mayor Clem Harder; Harder had no choice but to add Fowler's name to the other two on the balloting list.

When the Acme Barbershop, which doubled as polling place on election day, was finally closed to voting and a count was taken. Luke Linker had just one vote; that had been Sharon's own. Sharon had two hundred and thirty and new-comer Fowler had wound up with nearly two hundred.

SHARON drew open the center drawer of the desk and felt around in the dim light. Her fingers closed on the smooth wood surface of familiar-feeling revolver grip. It was Tex's; there was no doubt. Sharon remembered fondly how Tex cut down the grip enough for her to hold it comfortably. That had been eight years ago when she, Tex and her father, Sim Emmons, had made up the Sim Emmons and Company trick riding and shooting trio that toured with the Tully-Farbach Circus throughout the East. When Sim passed away with pneumonia, Tex decided to go West again. Sharon stayed on with the show.

Tiny glints of light flashed from the .38 as she twirled the cylinder, then dropped the six shooter into its holster and strapped it around her slim waist.

From inside her blouse she drew out a much thumbed letter. It was dated six months ago in Tex's hasty-looking handwriting.

> Dear Sis: I'm not much of a hand at letter writing and I already told you I got myself voted sheriff of Paragon City. Sorry I didn't get down to Kansas City when your show was there. It would've taken two weeks down and back and right now things are not good here and I figured I'd better not leave.
>
> This isn't a bad town but two men, Clem Harder and Rush Cutter, run things which is no good 'cause they're both crooks. That's why I couldn't leave 'cause I figure I've finally got enough evidence to run them out of town. They both have been having things there own way up here stealing the town dry. The auditors are due in to check up on things at the bank and after that maybe I can get away. Are you keeping in practice with your shooting or doing a straight riding act?
>
> Your devoted brother,
> Tex Emmons"

Tears clouded Sharon's eyes for a moment. On one corner of the desk was a browned tin-type photo taken when Sim Emmons & Co. had played Chicago. She studied the picture of the fifteen-year-old girl for several minutes, then picked up the photo and held it poised over the lamp chimney. "Someone might see the resemblance," she said softly and with a feeling of sadness stuffed it down into the chimney and watched the flames lick at the browned emulsion.

A knock jarred her from her thoughts. Hastily Sharon closed the desk drawer, stuffed the letter back in her blouse and crossed the room.

Half-shadowed in the doorway Sharon saw a man, black stetson in hand. "May I come in," he said in a gentle voice that held a hint of laughter.

She noticed his gun was tied down on his thigh draw-fighter fashion. He was several inches under six feet, but compactly built with flat hips, straight shoulders set well back which gave his

chest a solid but unexaggerated appearance.

One lock of unruly blond hair hung over one side of his forehead but the little boy look it created was immediately dispelled by his wide-set, steady grey-green eyes. Sharon recognized him from seeing him at the polling place. "Come in, Mr. Fowler," she said. "What can I do for you?"

"Just this," Rand Fowler stepped quickly forward and drew her to him with a firm grip. "Wanted a chance to congratulate the new sheriff."

He held her lightly away from him a moment.

Sharon was surprised, but not too surprised to have resisted had she wanted to. But in the brief time she'd been in Paragon City she'd felt more and more alone—missed the gayety, the color, music and friendly banter of the circus life—and this man, whom she'd never seen until a few hours before in front of the Acme Barbershop, somehow didn't seem like a stranger to her.

When he drew her close and pressed his warm lips to hers she found herself clinging to him. For just a brief instant she returned his kiss with an ardor that amazed her. Unconsciously her arms locked around his neck. She felt a tingling sensation that coursed through her body and suddenly made her legs tremble.

For a moment she was afraid to faint; then, fighting against her natural impulse, she unlocked her arms, drew them forward and pushed firmly against his chest. And, hating her own dishonesty as she did it, she slapped his cheek soundly as she stepped from the circle of his arms. He put one hand to his jaw, wriggled his mouth experimentally and eyed her with an amused look as she retreated behind the desk. "Looks like inconsistency is going to be the law around here again." His eyes were mocking. "Never did have a sheriff who could think for himself except Emmons and they got rid of him in a hurry."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Fowler. I didn't mean to lead you on and then..." She stopped suddenly, annoyed at herself for starting to apologize. "Anyway, you've got a lot of nerve busting in here and..."

RAND FOWLER'S generous mouth spread in a grin. He looked around the dingy office. His eyes came to rest on the smoked tin remains of the burned photograph. From there his gaze wandered to the gun strapped at her waist.

"See you've been cleaning things up a bit. Tex, that is Emmons, your predecessor as sheriff, valued that picture you just destroyed. Used to show it to me every time I came in here."

Sharon didn't answer.

"Picture of his father and sister. She was a redhead, so Tex told me. Worked with a circus..." He stared at her for a moment. "I wonder." He stared around the desk. "Could it be possible that..."

"Just keep your distance, Mr. Fowler. I've had all of the pawing I want for one evening. And now you can go back across the street and brag to your cronies that you've properly congratulated the new sheriff. Go ahead, Mr. Fowler. Everyone thinks it's funny to have a woman sheriff. Go on back and have your little joke. Let 'em laugh..." her voice trembled, and she started to cry, loathing herself but unable to stem the flow of tears.

"When you get through crying, Sheriff, you might take a look in at the Paragon Bar. Might be some trouble tonight." He turned toward the door.

"Damn you!" She grabbed the ink-encrusted pen holder from the desk and threw it at his retreating figure. The inkwell and its heavy brass container crashed against the closing door.

"Congratulations again, Sheriff," his voice called through the closed door.

●

A half hour later, with all traces of her recent breakdown washed away, Sharon crossed the boardwalk, her high-heeled boots tapping loudly as she climbed the two steps to the porch that fronted the bar. She paused a moment before the door, squared her shoulders and nervously bit at her lip. "This is for you, Tex," she whispered. "They've played right into our hands by pinning this badge on me. I'm going to try to square this deal for you, but I wish I were the man you were for this job." She forced herself to shove open the swinging door.

Inside, it was brightly lighted. The acid odor of stale tobacco smoke, whiskey and beer cut at her nostrils. A bar stretched along one entire side of the room. To her right were a dozen or more green-covered tables.

"Howdy, Sheriff." "Congratulations, Pinky." "Here comes the sheriff," greeted Sharon as she walked uncertainly into the room. The greetings were perfunctory. Interested centered on one table near the rear of the room where a knot of about thirty men surrounded two card players.

The crowd gave way slightly as Sharon approached and uneasily made an aisle for her to move in close to the table.

RUSH CUTTER, one of the two men at the table, glanced at her from the corners of his eyes, nodded and turned his attention back to his cards. The other player in the two-man draw game was Rand Fowler, but a more tensed Fowler than the man who'd held her a short time ago. His red and white horsehide vest was unbuttoned. His neat black Stetson was tilted forward over his eyes and an unlighted cigarette dangled limply from one corner of his mouth.

Several neat stacks of silver dollars were near his right hand, which had long tapering fingers with little pads of callous visible on the underside. His left hand gently stroked the surface of the green felt.

"What d'ya say, Fowler?" Cutter's voice was harsh and held a cold brittle note.

Rand didn't look up, but his left hand pulled the cards in close to his vest. With a deft thumb and forefinger movement he fanned them out, glanced at them, separated one card from the four remaining, and slid it to the center of the table.

"Double draw," someone whispered to Sharon.

"Once more," Fowler said in a steady voice.

Cutter's fleshy hands reached the deck to mid table. With his thumb he dropped one card near the more relaxed appearing player.

Rand Fowler didn't look immediately at his hole card. He took ten dollars from one stack and dropped them into the pot. "Double it?" he asked.

Cutter nodded and the man added another ten. Cutter matched with twenty.

Cutter slid one card from the top of the deck, lifted a corner with his thumbnail. Sharon could see the broad yellow-toothed grin on Clem Harder's face as he looked into Cutter's hand.

"Your bet," Cutter muttered.

Fowler calmly threw out another ten. Cutter tossed in twenty and the young rancher matched and raised it ten. The crowd around Sharon were breathing heavily.

Cutter's eyes narrowed. He stole another look at his hand as if to make sure of his cards.

"Light ten and fifty more," Cutter said, counting out sixty dollars from the pot and placing them to one side.

Sharon thought she detected a faint look of annoyance pass over Fowler's features.

"Better see him, Rush; he might..."

"Shut up, Harder," Cutter snarled, unable to conceal his anger at Fowler's calmness and his obvious run of luck.

"And fifty." Fowler's voice was controlled.

Cutter glanced again at his cards. He drew another dollar from the pot

to indicate he was light. "See you, and fifty," he said hoarsely, counting another fifty and putting them to one side.

Sharon judged the pot to be close to five hundred dollars.

"Started out as a quarter limit game," one of the men said. "Cutter suggested the double draw; he'll be mad as blazes if he loses."

Again Fowler dug into his dwindling stack of dollars and slowly counted them.

"Hurry up." Harder's voice was hoarse with excitement.

The rancher stopped counting. He looked up at Harder coldly and then deliberately bit off a bit of sodden tobacco and paper from his cigarette. He took the cold butt from his mouth and, seeming scarcely to look at the mayor, spat. The sodden wad missed Harder's immaculate sleeve by a fraction of an inch and landed on his polished boot.

"Shut up," Cutter growled as Harder started to splutter a protest.

An amused titter of laughter sounded from the crowd of tensed onlookers. Harder glared back at them, scowled at Fowler, but made no other comment.

Finally the rancher shoved his money toward the center of the table. As he threw in the last silver dollar he said quietly, "I'm seeing you," spread his hand, then tossed it down open toward Cutter. Sharon leaned forward eagerly. It was a full house, aces and queens.

Cutter slammed his cards face down. A hand near the table reached out and turned them. Cutter had held a full house, too, jacks and nines.

Rand Fowler calmly raked in the pot. Cutter walked over to the bar, the back of his neck beet red.

He's madder at losing in front of the crowd than about the money, Sharon decided.

"All right, men. Drinks are on me," the lean rancher called and walked toward the bar. "Set 'em up for everyone," he said to the bartender.

Sharon stood to one side as the men lined up and were served.

THE BARTENDER, who'd been watching the progress of the game from a distance and hadn't been able to see the table itself from his partially obstructed vantage point paused in front of Fowler.

"Mr. Cutter will pay," Rand said quietly. "The pot was light a hundred and eleven dollars."

"What's the matter, mister. You're suggesting I didn't mean to pay it, are you?" There was a mean note in Cutter's voice. Sharon noticed a slight tightening of the muscles of Rand's forearms as his fingers bunched into knots at his side.

"I'm not suggesting anything, Cutter," he answered evenly. "But I don't see you hurrying up to pay."

The crowd opened again as Cutter walked forward threateningly. One fist was doubled. The other hung close to the gun at his hip.

"Might be a good idea not to pay, Rush," Harder's voice chimed in. "That was damned long luck this eyeballer had."

Sharon saw Harder's right hand steal downward and pat his gun.

"You're not inferring it wasn't luck?" Rand Fowler's eyes narrowed.

Harder breathed deeply with excitement. His close-set blue watery eyes scanned the faces to be sure the majority of the men were backing him. Most of them had dropped a few dollars to Fowler and selfishly hoped to see trouble.

Harder was behind and to the left of Cutter so that the right side of Harder's short frame was hidden from the rancher.

"That's just what I do mean." Harder's voice quavered. Sharon saw his hand stealthily draw his gun from his holster.

The two shots came almost in unison. As Rand's fingers darted for his gun Harder fired. But even as Harder's gun hand moved upward, Sharon drew her own gun and fired.

For a second no one uttered a sound. Harder's pained scream cut through the silence. Fowler, now with his back to the bar, gun out watched Cutter, saw that the hotelman made no move to draw, then turned slowly toward Sharon.

"Better take care of your sidekick, Mr. Cutter; I think he'll have a sore hand for a few days," Sharon said.

"Lucky shot, Sheriff," the bartender called across the bar. He grinned, bucked toothily, trying to smooth the tenseness from the situation.

"Lucky for me," Fowler said and thanked her with the first sign of feeling she'd seen in his cold, steady eyes since she'd entered the bar.

"Yeah, lucky, boys," Sharon said. "And now we're closing up so get going. Remember? No bars open on election night—or don't you men know your own town laws?"

"Some kidder, that Pinky," a voice in the crowd said; "let's buy her a drink."

Sharon tried to keep her voice steady. "Maybe you boys don't remember, but you elected me sheriff. The law says no bar is to be open on election night; I'm closing the bar."

"Hurray, for Pinky. Set 'em up, Murray," the same voice called to the bartender. "Not only pretty, but she's got a sense of humor."

"What about it, boss?" Murray asked Cutter.

"Set 'em up, Murray. Drinks are on me." Cutter said as he counted out a stack of silver dollars, pushed them down the bar toward Fowler.

Murray turned his bald head to the bar, grabbed a handful of shot glasses and lined them up along the bar.

Sharon felt her legs tremble slightly, but her voice was steady as she said, "Put that bottle back on the shelf, Murray. I said the bar was closed. I mean it." Actually she didn't care, but she'd planned a showdown sooner or later. It might as well be now, she thought.

A few of the men looked questioningly at Sharon, but most of them turned and lined up to wait for Murray to pour.

Murray considered it a huge joke. He tilted the bottle upward over the shot glass in front of Cutter, turned and winked at Sharon.

Cutter's right hand closed over the glass. He held it up in Sharon's direction. "Don't take your new job too serious, Pinky. Remember, I'm still boss of this town."

SHARON'S right hand flashed upward in a quick arc, the way it had so many times in her trick shooting act at the circus. The .38 barked once. Cutter's shot glass jumped from his hand and crashed into dozens of tiny splinters.

Murray froze with his right hand still holding the whiskey bottle in the air. The .38 barked again and the bottle disintegrated in the startled bartender's hands. Sticky brown fluid ran down over his wrists as a pool of spirits formed on the bar amidst the jagged bits of broken bottle.

A flash of anger crossed Cutter's bloated features. Sharon met his look steadily and continued to hold the .38 balanced lightly in her hand. Cutter gulped several times, then turned with a forced smile on his face, said, "Guess the sheriff means business tonight, boys. Have to teach her a few rules before she takes that tin badge too seriously. Maybe when I take the price of that bottle of whiskey out of her wages, she'll not be so quick on the trigger."

It was a feeble jest; only a few of the men laughed. Sharon waited a few minutes until the men started crowding out through the double doors, then replaced her revolver in its holster and walked toward the door.

"Better find yourself a new waitress, Mr. Cutter. I just quit." She turned and stamped off down the steps.

"May I see you home, Sheriff," a voice at her elbow said as Sharon started across the street to the sheriff's office where she was planning to stay now.

"Thank you, no." And for the second time that night she was annoyed at her verbal reaction to Rand Fowler.

"Good night, Miss Forest. Maybe I was wrong about you earlier tonight; guess Tex Emmons would have been right proud of you." Then he was gone into the darkness as Sharon walked alone across the rutted, sodden street.

•

The month following her election as sheriff passed rapidly for Sharon. Word of her action at the Paragon Bar on election night spread through the town like a prairie fire. Overnight she became Paragon City's most talked of citizen.

During her first week Sharon made it perfectly clear to Cutter that although he had Sharon elected to office, and had done so as a practical joke, the joke was on him. After their initial anger changed to amazement that their playful kitten had turned wildcat, Cutter and Harder shrugged and let her alone. It amused them to watch and wait to see what might happen.

Although she made a few enemies in carrying out her work of her office, she also accumulated a vast number of new friends, most loyal of whom was Luke Linker.

Twice she saw Rand Fowler at a distance, but not until the end of the month did she have an opportunity to talk to him again.

She went over and over the background of the theft that had led to Tex's death, but aside from her original suspicions, she was no nearer to any conclusive proof than she had been when she first arrived at Paragon City.

The story she heard from various townsfolk was basically the same. A shipment of fifteen thousand dollars in newly minted coins and currency had been expected at the railway depot. Clem Harder and Rush Cutter in their respective official capacities as president and chairman of the board of directors of the Paragon City Bank had gone to the station to receive the shipment. Tex Emmons, as sheriff, had been asked to accompany them as a formality to give official protection.

Part way back from the railway depot to the bank, the trio had been set upon by masked riders who had shot down Tex Emmons in cold blood and ridden off with the money.

Witnesses reported hearing horses racing away shortly after the sound of shots, but no trace of the money or Tex's killers had been found. Neither Harder nor Cutter varied their stories under routine questioning and after what seemed to Sharon a very superficial investigation into the case, the matter was dropped.

A BIT OF snooping on Sharon's part indicated that Clem Harder had loaned considerable sums of money to several new ranchers whose spreads had gone broke overnight. Through Luke Linker she learned of several, sizeable range deliveries. Luke explained these were loans on ranches that were as good as non-existent.

"Jim Kester's outfit was one I hyar tell. He had a one-hoss outfit south a here sixty mile or so. Knew Jim well. Used to come into town in a buckboard pulled by an old buzzard bait hoss. Show you how prosperous Jim was. His boots was so frazzled he couldn't strike a match on 'em without burnin' his feet. Jim gets a three thousand loan from Harder. I figure the whole layout including Jim's clothes and saddle ain't wuth three hundred."

"And?" Sharon asked, waiting for Luke to continue.

"And Jim skips and that's it. Bank gets stuck for three thousand. 'Course

maybe Jim splits with Harder before he skips out." Luke winked one eye slyly and spat on the pot-bellied stove.

"Folks figures I'm poco loco, but I can figure things. Maybe Clem Harder knows all the time Jim Kester is gonna gin out on that there loan. Maybe that's what Harder wanted. And again maybe you think I'm just cuttin' a big gut."

"Luke, maybe you've really hit it. Leastwise it's worth a try. Will you help me and no questions asked?"

Sharon outlined her plan to Luke and asked him to get to work on it immediately. Luke shook his shaggy head in agreement and grinned his silly grin at her.

Sharon watched Luke until he disappeared through the doorway of the barbershop, then she scurried across the office into the room behind it which served as her living quarters. Hurried as she felt, she took time to heat a kettle of water and hummed as she lathered herself in the huge wooden tub Murray, the bartender at the Paragon, had built her. From the bottom of her trunk she carefully drew out a pale green silk blouse, doeskin levis, and a black Stetson. A pair of black moccassins completed her outfit. It was simple, but its effect had been tried before on her circus audiences and she knew it played up her red hair and delicate coloring to perfection.

Her appearance was bound to set some of her detractors to gossiping, but she didn't care. Ever since her arrival in Paragon City, she'd been careful to dress conservatively and almost drably; today was to be different.

She started for the door, then pausing for a moment, undecided, she turned back and kneeling again beside her trunk located her precious bottle of perfume. Carefully she touched the glass stopper to each ear lobe, the nape of her neck. Then, after a brief mental debate she continued to hum as she put a tiny dab in the soft, gently rounded hollow between her breasts.

●

The early summer afternoon air was laden with pine scent on the switch-back road rutted here and there by the run-off of late spring rains. Birds soared and dipped in the clearing in free-winging flight. Squirrels scurried and halted, then scurried again in their typical nervous fashion. The sky was lightly tinted with white fluffy clouds down low near the horizon, but clean-swept and blue overhead. A gentle breeze, directed at her, carried with it the fresh mellow smell of the long grass in the valley below.

As she rode through a cut she stopped and dismounted. Tiny streams of crystal clear water spurted in rivulets from a split rock. She bent forward and let the cool water surge for a moment through her widespread fingers. Then she cupped her hand and took several long draughts. A sudden impulse made her bend forward farther. She tilted her head sideways, opened her mouth and let the water trickle between her lips. She could feel fine icy splashes on her bosom as her blouse swung loosely forward.

The sound of a boot scraping on stone caused her to spring upright and whirl around.

His hat was pushed far back on his head and that same single unruly lock of blond hair hung to his forehead dampened slightly by perspiration. "Hi," he said. "Don't let me interrupt you. I was enjoying the scenery."

She felt the rush of blood to her cheeks and knew she was blushing. *It was going to have been so different this time,* she thought. *Damn him, he has an uncanny knack of always catching me off guard.*

"Hello." Her voice sounded like a stranger's to her. *If he smiles just once, I'm licked,* she thought.

He moved slowly toward her with an easy swinging walk. His right hand was extended and the corners of his eyes wrinkled slightly as he smiled.

She took his hand and then it happened as she'd known it would. Just the clasp of his hand set off a chain reaction of tingling.

"You look beautiful in that pale green shirt, and..." He didn't finish. He didn't have to because suddenly his arms were around her waist and she was clinging to him hard.

His lips combined strength and softness in a heady mixture that made her want to hang onto him forever. One of his hands stroked her head, then gently his fingers ran through her hair.

"Rand, darling," she whispered. "It's been so long."

"I know, my sweet," he said gently.

HOW LONG he held her, she didn't know. It seemed just seconds, but it must have been minutes. He finally released her when her horse started to paw impatiently.

"I was on my way to call on you, Mr. Fowler," she said somewhat formally, feeling embarrassed now that she raced him from outside the relaxed circle of his arms.

"Rand," he corrected.

"All right." She laughed lightly. "Rand it is. Anyway, I had to talk to you."

"Problems, Sheriff?" he asked kiddingly.

"Uh-huh."

"Important ones?"

"To me."

"Personal?"

"Yes and no. Official. More than that is something I can't tell you about now."

He studied her seriously for a moment. "Taking your job kinda seriously, aren't you, Sheriff?"

"You seemed willing enough to try to get voted into my job," she snapped.

"Now take it easy, Redhead. After all, Sheriff, I owe you my life. Guess you proved you could handle law and order that first night."

"I just had to talk to someone, Rand. You're the only person other than Luke Linker I can trust. I can trust you, can't I?"

He moved toward her.

"Not now, Rand, please. I'm sorry, but I just want to talk."

"Let's have it."

"Well." She paused, tried to gather together her thoughts, then began again. "You knew Tex Emmons fairly well, didn't you, Rand?"

"Not for long, but we hit it off right from the start. Guess I only knew Tex for three months or so, but figured I'd known him all my life." His eyes narrowed slightly as he waited for her to continue."

"I've been doing some checking around. Actually I can't find anyone who witnessed Tex's death other than Harder and Cutter."

"Go on."

"Now suppose Harder and Cutter had dipped into the bank's funds. And suppose they knew an audit was due and they had to cover up a deficit before their accounts were checked."

"I'm way ahead of you, Sheriff. You're not going to infer that maybe Harder and Cutter actually gunned Tex and then used that money to cover their thievery of bank funds?"

"Well," she said slowly, feeling that he was making fun of her, "I had sort of figured that way."

"There never was an accounting of those bank funds."

"I found that out, Rand."

"And?"

"And suppose there was to be a run on the bank. If Harder and Cutter knew they didn't have the money they were supposed to have, they'd be forced to show their hands, wouldn't they?" She looked at him hopefully.

"Guess they would."

"I think there'll be a run on the bank."

HE STOPPED and stared at her in disbelief. "You!"

"Uh-huh. At least indirectly. I have Luke Linker starting a whispering campaign; maybe I'm wrong, but I figure that by this time tomorrow there'll be a crowd lined up outside that bank demanding their money or else."

"Why tell me all this, Sharon?"

"'Cause if there's a run on the bank there'll also be plenty of trouble. I don't want anyone killed, or even hurt, and when you get a couple of hundred men from range bosses and cattle stiffs down to sheep dippers and land sharks all yelling for their dinero at one time something's likely to happen."

"There'll be trouble all right."

"That's why I wanted to see you. I wondered if you'd be a deputy for me and line me up with a half dozen or so other men you can trust." She watched him as she waited for his answer. As seconds passed and he didn't snap out with a "sure," Sharon's spirits went daunsy.

"Sharon, I..." he started and a worried frown puckered across above his eyebrows. "I'd like to, but..."

Suddenly she stepped away from him. "You'd like to, but..." she mimicked. "Sure you're a great one for kissing, but when it comes to a real man's job you turn cold foot. You'd like to. Well, Mr. Fowler, I'd like to tell you a few things, you no good, ranch jerker. You wear a drawfighter's rig on your leg and act fancy around women, but you're boogered of your own shadow..." Her voice cracked and she turned from him to hide the sudden rush of tears to her eyes.

"Sharon," he called after her as she mounted and started at a gallop toward town. "Sharon, let me explain." His voice was lost in the furious clop, clop sound of her horse. He shrugged, plucked a blade of spongy grass and chewed it meditatively as she disappeared into a ravine.

•

By noon the following day wagons of all descriptions jammed the streets of Paragon City. Every tie-rail in town had lines laid over it every few feet. In front of the bank a throng three and four abreast stretched back fifty yards. On either side of the straggling line men wandered aimlessly, muttering, cursing and shouting.

After four vain attempts to deputize some of those men Sharon considered to be most responsible, she gave up the idea of enlisting aid. Every man she approached had the same answer. What money he had was in the bank and if the bank didn't pay off there'd be trouble—and he'd help make it.

At one o'clock the bank's doors were locked. Sharon, from the porch in front of Hanley's Hardware Store, listened to the mob's talk take on the sound of a dozen angry beehives.

Against her better judgment, but really to repay Luke for his success in starting the run on the bank, Sharon pinned a deputy badge to his dirty flannel shirt. She warned Luke not to make himself too conspicuous. However, as she had feared, Luke strutted and swaggered through the crowd to show off his badge.

"Where's Clem Harder," a voice in the crowd called.

"We want our money."

"What about it Harder? Where's our money?"

A window pane crashed, then another, and in an instant, a flurry of stones blasted every window from the front of the bank. The panic stricken face of the teller appeared for a moment peering through the jagged remnants of glass.

Sharon continued to look on. She was nervous. Icy fingers of uncertainty played along her spine. But she made no move to stop the mob.

"I saw Cutter and Harder in the bank just before it was locked up," a short, stocky big-bellied fellow said. "Let's smoke them out."

"Smoke 'em out! Smoke 'em out!" The cry swept through the crowd.

Two alcoholic appearing men with weak, watery eyes, grabbed hold of the fence rail in front of the hardware store.

Sharon's .38 sprang from its holster. "Lay off, sourdough," Sharon said to the nearest man. "There'll be no destruction of private property."

The man shrugged and the two hurried off to look for scrap lumber.

A WAGON careened around the corner, rolled to a stop on the fringe of the crowd and men eagerly grabbed at the bales of straw stacked in it. Heavy yellow smoke poured from the improvised bonfire, twisted upward, then caught by the draft formed by the broken windows, rolled in heavy throat-cutting clouds into the brick bank building.

Five minutes passed, then the sound of the heavy chain rattling signalled the opening of the bank door. The red-eyed figure of the teller stumbled to the street clutching at his throat as he gasped for gulps of fresh air.

"Where's Harder, Timkins?" A heavy boot flashed out and kicked at the prone figure to stir him into speech.

Timkins, the teller, continued to clutch at his raw throat and pointed back into the building. "Still in there," he spluttered.

What happened next was unexpected. Apparently Luke Linker moved in to offer protection to the choking teller. At any rate he was in the center of the mob near the doorway. From where Sharon stood she saw only the shoving and pushing of the mob as, sensing a new angle of excitement, they squeezed forward. Suddenly a shot rang out, then another, and all around her Sharon saw men snatch for firearms.

This was what she'd hoped wouldn't happen, but now that it had, she must stop it; she saw Linker fall, grabbing at one leg as he went down.

"Stop it," she yelled, waving her arms at the milling and twisting crowd, but she might as well have shouted at stampeding cattle.

An old man slipped and disappeared under surging feet.

A heavy set, red faced man leaped to the bank steps, brandished a revolver and waved at the mob in signal to charge.

"Don't shoot," a high-pitched, hysterical voice called. Clem Harder, his soot-and-tear-stained face scarcely recognizeable, staggered from the front door of the bank, his hands held high over his head.

"Find a rope," someone screamed, as the struggling figure of the major and bank president was hoisted aloft on the shoulders of the men nearest him.

"Do something. Help me," Sharon called frantically to Rand Fowler, who, along with two of his riders, were working their way rapidly through the fringe of the crowd.

He glanced at her, a weak apology in his eyes and rode on. "Sorry. Can't," he called back over his shoulder as he galloped off down the main street away from the bank.

"Coward," she yelled. "I hate you, hate you, hate you," but her voice was lost in the roar that went up as the men carrying Clem Harder dumped him unceremoniously in front of the hardware store porch.

"String him up. Stretch his neck, the lousy thief," a gaunt woman screamed.

"We'll teach 'im not to steal from honest folk," a man yelled as he flung a manila line over the rafter extending from the porch roof.

Clem Harder's face was pasty white where smoke stains had been washed away by tears. He was still sputtering trying to get his breath and between choking coughs and sobs he begged the men to wait, to let him explain.

Sharon's eyes blazed with anger. She loathed Rand Fowler, but even thoughts of his cowardly disappearance were pushed from her mind as she

faced the mob determined to take the law in their own hands.

"Hold it, men," she said in a loud, untrembling voice. "I'll take over. There'll be no lynch as long as I'm sheriff. If Harder stole your money, he'll get his punishment in due time.

"Shut up, Pinky," the gaunt woman screamed. "We're fed up with law around here. The only law we ever had here was what Cutter and Harder gave us."

Again Sharon held up her hands; a new thought suddenly struck her. "All right, men. Go ahead. String him up." She leaned back lazily against the rail, watching the look of horror spread on Harder's face; then her voice quietly broke in on the tense silence, "Unless—he wants to tell us what happened to Sheriff Tex Emmons."

A COARSE-FACED man with knobby, roughened wrists busily formed a noose at one end of the line. "What about it, Harder? Want to tell what really happened to Tex Emmons?"

The crowd was interested now, willing to wait a bit to see what Harder would tell.

"You have no right to permit this," Harder blustered. "You'll all be punished if anything happens to me."

It was a long shot, but Sharon decided to risk it. She knew she'd never permit the crowd to lynch Harder as long as she had a breath of life remaining, but she intended to carry on her bluff.

"Go to it, boys. Haul away; swing him high so's his boots won't drag," she called.

The last remnant of Harder's composure fell away like sheep's wool under a shear. His eyes rolled back showing clouded whites as he swayed and started to faint.

A ham-like hairy hand reached from the crowd and gave him a backhanded slap that snapped him fully conscious.

His hands trembled like a newborn colt's legs. Spittle ran down his chin as his mouth worked frantically in an effort to force speech. "I'll tell," he blubbered. "I'll tell. Rush Cutter. Find Cutter. He killed Emmons. It was his idea. He shot him and..."

Already part of the crowd started to swarm back toward the bank building.

Suddenly, far down main street toward the Paragon Hotel, a shot rang out, followed in rapid succession by a whole fusillade of shots. Then all was silent.

For a moment the crowd stood still in indecision. The figure of the grovelling Harder fascinated them, but curiosity pulled them to the scene of the shooting.

As they hesitated a rider wearing a black Stetson shoved far back on his head reigned to a halt.

Sharon glared at him as he shouldered his way through the crowd and swung up onto the store porch. "Coward," she muttered silently. "Run out when it looks like trouble."

He pushed her gently aside, pulled out a pocket knife and cut the rope from the rafters, then jumped down lightly to the porch floor.

"What the hell's he butting in for," the red-faced man asked and sprang to the porch, swinging a hard right at Rand Fowler's jaw.

Rand ducked, pushed a stiff left to the man's paunchy stomach and didn't bother to look as the man grunted and pitched backward to the ground.

He held open his vest to disclose a United States Marshal's badge, and in a steady voice said, "I'm a United States Marshal. I order you to clear the street. There will be no more excitement today. You people can check your savings when the bank reopens next week; some of the stolen money has been recovered. Maybe by then we can recover the rest from Mr. Harder's so-called personal property."

"What about Rush Cutter?"

"If Mr. Cutter lives he'll go on trial for the murder of Tex Emmons," Rand answered. "Right now, with six slugs in him, I kinda think he may never get to trial."

He turned to Sharon who was staring at him in amazement and relief. "Sheriff, you'd better take your prisoner and lock him up before he dies of heart failure." He pointed to Harder, whose eyes were fear-glazed.

A HALF HOUR later a knock sounded at the door of the sheriff's office. Sharon hastily dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief, then called, "Come in."

He walked in slowly, hat in hand. "Howdy, Sherifff," he said, and grinned tiredly.

"Howdy, Marshal."

They walked slowly toward one another. This time she kissed him ardently, but as she tightened her hands behind his neck she felt him wince and draw away. *Oh, no,* she thought; *he can't change in his feelings now.* All of her pent up loneliness cried out for this man. Her man. He had to be hers.

She looked into his eyes for an explanation and noticed for the first time the tightly drawn corners of his mouth and the bandages on his left hand. "Burned my hand a bit, Redhead. Don't fret, I'll be all healed up in no time."

"Huh!" She snorted. "A lot I care."

He grinned and dropped into the cracked leather arm chair beside her desk. "Caught Cutter just as he started to set fire to the bank's books. Planned to skip out. Had the money in the back of his buckboard. These local waddies will be more careful about choosing their bankers hereafter."

"So that's why you couldn't help me." She sat down on the arm of the chair and dreamily stroked his hair.

He nodded. "I had to be free to keep track of Cutter. I didn't want to tip my hand that I was a marshal and scare him out too soon. I was pretty sure he'd try to destroy the evidence and make a break; and I needed that evidence."

He paused and looked up at her thoughtfully. "I have to leave the middle of next week, soon's I get the bank affairs straightened."

"But you can't, Rand. I won't let you. You must..."

"You could come with me, Miss Emmons. Tex always said you and I'd get on fine. I never figured to meet you, though, after Tex got ambushed."

"You knew all along I was Tex's sister?"

"I was pretty certain that first night when I caught you burning that picture. Then when you gave that exhibition of shooting at the bar, I was plumb sure."

"I don't want you to go, Rand."

"I said you could come with me; being a marshal's wife isn't such a bad job."

"But you'd probably gamble away all our money," she said jokingly, happy and yet with a choked up feeling as if she wanted to laugh and cry all at the same time."

"I never gamble, Redhead."

"You were sure pushing cards around that night at the Paragon."

"Oh, that. Well, that was in the line of duty. I'd hoped to trap Cutter into tossing one of those newly-minted dollars into the pot; guess he had too much savvy for that. Had it all stashed away still in the original wrappers. It's taken a long time, but now—thanks to you, Sheriff—I have my evidence and my job's finished here." He looked up, his eyes teasing. "Of course if you want to stick around and go on being sheriff..."

For an answer, Sharon slid down onto his lap. With one hand she pulled his head down to meet her lips. A shiny sheriff's badge dropped from the fingers of her other hand and rolled clattering, unnoticed, across the floor.

★

DEATH WATCH

By Clint Young

A man does what he has to, if he's a man—whether or not it's his job.

DAN GOODNIGHT stood on the rough board planking fronting his general store and watched the town's water wagon trundle past, its spreading wet fingers patting down the dust of Gunsight's main street. That was the signal, he knew, for his son Wes to appear for his last chore before they went into the back of the store and had breakfast.

In a moment the youngster came out, carrying the broom. He went to one end of the wooden-awninged porch and worked down toward the door, sweeping out halfway and then going back and shoving the brushings off down into the street, between the edge of the boards and the horserack. He worked steadily, with full concentration.

Dan said gently, "Doesn't take long with that system of yours, does it, Wes."

Wes looked up momentarily, shook his head, and gave his attention back to the broom. He was not quite ten yet—a thin, reedy boy who would grow into his father's loose-knit frame and who already had something of Dan's shyness and his thoughtful manner.

"I'll get breakfast on the way."

The clop-clop of a rider putting into Main checked him and when the horseman swung toward them Dan turned back. Wes glanced up, hesitated in brief indecision, and then leaned the broom against the storefront.

The stranger put his big gray up to the rack and looked at Dan and then at Wes and the broom. "That's a woman's work you're doing, kid."

"It's work that has to be done," Dan said mildly. He knew how Wes felt about sweeping off the porch, why he always waited until after the watering wagon passed before beginning it and why he had put the broom down when the rider appeared. He was at an age when he wanted desperately to be a man, and no man—except maybe storekeepers and stablemen—ever wielded a broom. "A man does what he has to," Dan said.

The newcomer shrugged, uninterested. He was about twenty-five, lean and hard-bitten, with the dust of night travel heavy on his horse and gear. He had looked at Wes once and Dan twice.

Now his eyes roved the street, still empty but with the vague sounds of a new day beginning to pervade it. They slid down to the *Blue Bell* saloon and back on the other side, stopping at the sheriff's office. Abruptly, he leaned forward on the saddle. "There was a killing here—about two weeks back. Your sheriff gunned down a drunk."

"Harvey Coyle," Dan said, "but he wasn't drunk. He—"

"He was drunk," the other man repeated. His voice was flat, almost uninflected. He swung out of the saddle then with the awkwardness of long hours without dismounting, the han-

"Wyatt Coyle's sheer poison with his guns."

dles of his Colts making angular projections at his hips. He got a coin from his pocket and flipped it to Wes. It landed in the ragged line of sweepings.

"There's two-bits, kid. Take my horse to the feed-barn." He glanced over at Dan. "I'll be down there in the saloon. Tell your sheriff it's Wyatt Coyle, Harvey's brother. And tell him I won't be drunk."

WHEN HE was out of earshot, Wes said, "I better run and tell the sheriff." His voice was pitched high and he brought it down. "The sooner Sheriff Stockton knows about him, the—"

"Not so fast, son," Dan interrupted. He put his hand on the boy's shoulder. "We've got to think about this first."

"But Dad!" Wes ducked away and turned to face him, his body quivering. "We've got to do something! I'll tell the other kids and when they tell their fathers— Why, Mr. Brooks and Mr. Rath, they're big ranchers. They'll bring in their crews and run that Wyatt Coyle out of town so fast he—"

"Wes." Dan's tone was gently insistent and he waited while the boy brought his tongue to an unwilling halt. "You were paid to take the horse to the livery barn, so maybe you'd better. And keep your lip buttoned."

Wes seemed to stir in all directions at once, rebellion strong in him. "We've got no time to think about it. The kids'll laugh at me when they find out. They'll say—they'll say it's just like a storekeeper." He jumped down from the raised walk into the street and took up the trailing reins of Wyatt Coyle's gray, not looking at his father.

"If Coyle made his announcement to us, he'll make it down there in the Blue Bell," Dan said. "It'll get to Sheriff Stockton."

"But we know about it now," Wes objected.

Dan nodded. "It's a bad situation, but it doesn't do to go running with bad news to anybody. Remember that, Wes." He watched the boy scuff up the dust with the metal-topped toes of his shoes before starting off with the gray. "Remember this too, son. Don't draw such a hard line between

cowmen and storekeepers; a man does what he has to, or he doesn't; that's how you tell if he's a man."

Later, during breakfast, Dan wondered briefly if he'd been infected with the custom of the country. He knew, as Wes did not, that Bill Brooks and Charlie Rath and the others would not interfere in the trouble between Asa Stockton and Wyatt Coyle. A man's troubles were his own affair, and they'd stay out, figuring that if the sheriff wanted help he'd ask for it.

And Wyatt Coyle was counting on this. He'd served notice. One man against one man, with the sheriff's pride forcing him to go it alone.

Dan had come from the east with his wife when Wes was about two and stayed on after his wife had died a few years back, and he'd thought the ways of this land were not his ways. But this reluctance to meddle even in so small a way as taking the message to Stockton was akin to the code of the west. *Stay out of other people's business.*

At a deeper level of understanding he knew that wasn't so, that he'd simply been unwilling to have Stockton hear it from them. For Dan had speculated on the sheriff's chances against Coyle and found them pretty slim. Against the other brother, Asa Stockton had been lucky.

Harvey Coyle had drifted into town and lost heavily at poker in the *Blue Bell.* When he dropped the last pot he called the game crooked, and Sheriff Stockton, over at the bar, remarked mildly that he didn't allow crooked poker in Gunsight. Harvey had called him a liar and reached for his gun. Sitting down, his elbow touched the chair and his shot missed, and the sheriff had been lucky enough to get him with his first bullet.

To Dan, the sheriff was a good, unspectacular lawman, pushing sixty and slowing down, yet still able to face up to average trouble and handle it adequately. Wyatt Coyle, though, hardly looked like what he'd call average trouble.

THE JANGLE of the trip bell over the store door caught them when they were putting away the dishes. This morning, Cora Stockton was earlier than usual, and Dan knew then that word must have gotten to her uncle. He said to Wes, "You can go off to school now," and seeing Wes's hesitation added, "You can tell the kids if you want."

For the past year Cora Stockton had been teaching school in Gunsight, living with her uncle, and for some months she'd been stopping in at Dan's store every morning on her way to the schoolhouse. At first she'd made a purchase or left an order for groceries or just looked without buying, but shortly she dropped all pretense and let Dan conclude that she dropped in to see him merely because she wanted to. That was a great concession for any woman to make in this land of relatively few women.

If she'd been exceptionally pretty, Dan would have been flattered; if she'd been quite plain, he would have thought her over-bold. As it was, Cora Stockton was neither. She was a tall girl with a long, even-featured face and clear gray eyes that met a man's with a calm and settled assurance. A *good wife for a man,* Dan thought, yet he remembered the twelve years' difference in their ages, the colorless pattern of his life, and told himself, *It wouldn't be fair to her. She needs a younger man, one who can offer her more. Someone like Ernie Brooks.*

She came through the kitchen now and Dan pulled out a chair for her at the table. He said, "I heard about Wyatt Coyle," and went to the cupboard for his tobacco can, leaning against the sheet metal sink while he packed the stringy cut into his pipe.

"What will he do, Dan?" Cora asked. She was gazing at the green-vined pattern of the oilcloth on the table, one finger absently following the tracery. "Wyatt Coyle, I mean."

"Wait, I guess." Dan sighed and came over to the table. "The next move's up to your uncle."

"Why Uncle Asa? Why is it up to him?" She was looking at Dan now, her eyes cloudy with an undirected anger, a growing impatience seething in them. "Wyatt Coyle's a professional gunfighter. There are other men in this town. Are they going to stand by and see murder done?"

"Coyle's quarrel is with your uncle."

"It is not with my uncle. It's with what he stands for—law in a town, and order in a town." She shook her head and for the first time Dan noted a female helplessness about her, the age-old inability of a woman to comprehend those things that are between men.

"What sort of a town do we want Gunsight to be?" Cora asked presently. "How can I go on teaching the children to be honest and fair and right-thinking? What happens today will make more of an impression on them than anything I can say, will wipe out everything I have said."

Dan nodded, thinking of Wes and of the boy's implicit confidence that the men of Gunsight would not let the sheriff face Wyatt Coyle alone. Wes knew that Sheriff Stockton stood for the right, and that the gunfighter, somehow, stood for what was wrong; yet that pattern was etched only imperfectly in his mind and the sharp, brief violence of the impending event might shatter it irreparably. Still unused to the sudden ferocities of this land, Wyatt Coyle's cold brutality shocked Dan.

"It won't happen a while yet, Cora," Dan said. "He'll sit there in the saloon, waiting for the sheriff to come to him. The town'll have time to think about it."

"But suppose Uncle Asa doesn't go into the *Blue Bell*? Suppose he stays away?"

Dan smiled bleakly. "I'd guess Coyle will give him till sundown, then hunt him up."

BY TEN O'CLOCK the town had taken on the air of a Roman holiday. Snatches of the crews on the nearer spreads had drifted in, tied their mounts at the rails in front of the*Blue Bell* and the *Drovers' Palace* on Dimity Street, and drifted out of the saloons again to drink coffee in the hotel dining room and meet in clumps on the street and talk in subdued voices. Even Ed Barrett, a nester from out on the Arrowhead, had left his wife with a week old baby, and creaked in on his buckboard.

Charlie Rath, the thin, tight-strung owner of the Circle 12, came into Dan's store with the provisions list he usually brought in on Saturday and dropped it on the counter.

"The missus claims I didn't get her the bacon she wanted," Rath said awkwardly. "I thought I'd come in early this week and stock up."

"Sure," Dan said. His eye ran down the list, mentally checking the amounts. "You wait while I load it in the wagon?"

The rancher started to shake his head, then lifted his sunbrowned hands and dropped them. "Hell, you know why I'm in Gunsight, Dan. Your kid told mine and he jumped right back on his pony and came back home to tell me."

"You bring your crew?"

"Most of them asked for the day off when I told them. They're here now." He stopped and put a puzzled squint on Dan. "Why would I *bring* them?"

"I just wondered." Dan jerked his head down street. "Coyle's in the *Blue Bell*."

Bill Brooks from Triangle came in then, shoving perspiration up onto his hair with a blue silk handkerchief. He was a heavy man, putting on more weight than he could carry comfortably. Ernie, his elder son, was with him. Bill asked, "What's he look like, Dan?"

"Thin like Charlie here, only taller," Dan said. "His flannel shirt's got a tear in the back and he needs a shave."

"One of my hands knew of him," Charlie Rath said. "Tough like rawhide."

Ernie Brooks looked out the window toward the sheriff's office. "Stockton's got real trouble this time." He was the man Dan thought of when he thought of Cora—about her age, steady, and already part owner of his father's Triangle spread.

"I figure he has," his father said. "You feel like a drink, Charlie?"

Rath started toward the door. "Let's take it in the *Blue Bell*."

They went out and waved to Sheriff Stockton, who was sitting outside his office across the street, his chair tilted back against the clapboard wall. He'd been there since before nine, a quiet, gray-haired man who returned the waves and the nods solemnly, and spoke occasionally to the few men who passed directly by him.

Dan had an uncomfortable feeling watching him through the store window. It was there in the cards for all to read, and they were reading it—but from a distance. Ranchers like Brooks and Rath, each with ten to a dozen men at their command, could change the lay of the cards at a word, yet they wouldn't unless the sheriff asked them to.

AT NOON Wes ran in from school, mumbling breathlessly that school was out for the day, that as soon as he'd told them about Wyatt Coyle, most of the children had gone home to tell their folks.

"It's going to be like I said," he told Dan positively. "He won't be allowed to shoot the sheriff. Billy Brooks said his father'd get a committee, and they'd tell Coyle to get on out of Gunsight. And Clem Rath said his father would get a gun and go after Coyle himself."

"Did you say what your father would do, Wes?" Dan asked.

The boy stared up, surprised. "Why—why I didn't say you'd do anything. Storekeepers don't fight with guns." He glanced through the window, saw the sheriff, and his excitement mounted again. "Anyway, it'll take a real man to go up against Coyle."

Dan smiled wryly at the boy's unconsciously uttered opinion of him. It *would* take a real man to go against Coyle, a man who'd used a gun, not just sold them across a counter. Well, Gunsight had enough men like that.

He was expecting Cora to stop by and he ate through lunch wondering how she would react to the town's attitude. When the bell summoned him he went into the store. Wes followed him

Cora's anger had been spent sometime during the morning, Dan saw, and now her deeper feelings gave her usually quiet expression a grave and uneasy solemnity. "Uncle Asa, waiting in front of his office. Wyatt Coyle, waiting in the *Blue Bell*. The whole town, just waiting."

"Have you talked with the sheriff?"

"All he said was that Coyle would have to come to him."

"He will."

"I suppose so." She came up to Dan. "Have you seen Mr. Rath and Mr. Brooks?"

"They're in town. Last I knew, in the Blue Bell to get a look at Coyle." He hesitated and then said gently, "They'll help if the sheriff wants it."

"But this is their town as much as it's his. More, for their young children.

"You can't change custom that easily." Dan said. "They grew up with it. It's as much a part of them as their dislike of farmers."

"But there are others, Dan," Cora said, almost pleadingly. "Ernie Brooks, for instance. He's younger. He should look at it differently."

"Perhaps."

Cora placed one slender hand flat on the counter. "I can hold a gun. I'll put Coyle on his horse if no one else will."

She'd try it, Dan thought. *Maybe a woman would, fighting for what she believed in.*

"Your uncle would never forgive you, Cora," he said. "You'd shame him. And another thing. It—it wouldn't be seemly."

"Dan! You, too." She said it slowly, as if surprised. "Well, I'll find out if

they intend to do anything. I'll speak to them in the Blue Bell."

She was at the door when Dan caught her. He had never touched her before, and now he released her arm almost as soon as he had grasped it. "Hold on a minute. No need for you to go into a saloon; I'll talk to them. Maybe that's all they need, somebody to get it started." He turned toward Wes and was pushed aside by the opening of the door.

WYATT COYLE came in. He stopped briefly in the doorway, boldly keeping his back to Sheriff Stockton across the street, and surveyed them calmly. He touched his hat to Cora, said, "Excuse me, Ma'am," and went past her to Wes. "You take care of my horse, kid?"

Wes stared at him before nodding and the gunman reached for another coin. "Don't take it Wes," Dan said.

Coyle looked over at him, his brows contracting sharply. All men had their pride, Dan knew, and gunfighters lived by it, but this was only a small crossing of Coyle's will and he seemed to realize it, for he said to Wes, "You stick with him and you'll always be doing women's work."

"Sometimes it takes a man to use a broom," Dan said.

The implication was clear. Coyle looked at Dan for a long moment and said with deliberate self-assurance, "Quite a man."

He walked over to the counter. "I'll be needing some grub for the trip back." He listed off coffee, bacon, sugar, and canned milk, and Dan got them and stacked them up. "You put them in a sack and hold it for me," the gunman directed. "How much?"

"Pay when you pick it up."

"I'll pay now."

Dan glanced at the money on the counter without touching it. Cora was standing by Wes, her eyes fixed on Coyle's back. "Maybe you won't be leaving the way you think," Dan said suddenly.

The gunman's face darkened in swift irritation. "You tend your business, storekeeper, and I'll tend mine I'll leave the way I came in, under my own steam.

The bell jangled after him, its harsh ringing dying off in the room's stillness. Dan got his hat from the back room. "Wes, you handle things here the best you can." He said to Cora, "I'll talk to Rath and Brooks."

The sun was angling into the west, pushing Dan's shadow ahead of him down the boardwalk. Down to the *Blue Bell*, the racked horses switched their tails against the flies and stamped restlessly, as if they felt the increasing tightness of the atmosphere. Dan tramped past two groups of cowhands without speaking.

He shoved the swing doors of the *Blue Bell* open onto a tableau. Rath and the two Brooks and Sid Webb and Dave Treat, two cowmen from south along the Arrowhead, were at a front table over by the wall, and strung back to the rear other tables held a scattering of men. Wyatt Coyle was at the deep end of the bar, pushed out from it, and, like the others, facing the door, immobile.

When he saw it was only Gunsight's storekeeper, Coyle swung back to his drink and the rest relaxed. Bill Brooks lifted his voice to the bartender. "Another glass, Will." Dan took a chair at their table and waited until the glass was filled.

Rath asked softly, "Stockton still at his office?"

"Cora says he intends to stay there for Coyle to go to him. Any of you think Coyle won't?"

"Not me," Dave Treat said.

Ernie Brooks said, "The sheriff's a dead man. Right now." His tongue was thick and Dan looked at him and noticed the heightened color of his cheeks. Ernie had been drinking more than somewhat, which was unusual for him. Occasionally he glanced toward Coyle and looked back at his glass and grunted.

"He is if we let him be," Dan said.

BILL BROOKS leaned past his son. "What do you mean by that, Dan?"

"Just that you get your crews and put it up to Coyle; he rides out now, or he won't ride out at all."

Bill glanced over at Rath and Rath tapped the table with his fingertips. "Stockton send you?" he asked finally.

Dan shook his head. Ernie murmured, "Cora?"

"Nobody," Dan said.

Ernie looked over toward Coyle. "Hell, all it takes is one bullet."

"Not yours, Ernie," his father remarked sharply.

"It's not a job for one man," Dan said insistently, "not even the sheriff." He was watching Brooks and Rath closely, trying to gauge their reaction, and he admitted grudgingly to himself that it was negative. But there was a chance they might be pushed, and he said, "Of course, if a man's afraid for his hide—"

"That's not it, Dan." Rath said, too sure of his position to take offense. "Let a gunslinger tack up a notice on me and I'd figure I had to go after him myself. So would any of us." He waited for their affirmative nods. "Stockton will get a fair shake. We'll see to that."

"It won't satisfy Cora."

"No woman ever did like gunplay."

"Nor the kids either. Clem and Billy, and my Wes. They've got the idea this concerns all of us."

Brooks shrugged his heavy shoulders. "They've got to grow up sometime."

A brooding silence fell upon the table, broken by the clink of glass as Ernie Brooks poured himself another drink. Dan said, "Well, I guess that's that," and left.

Outside, the sun leaned far into the west and Dan turned full into it. He'd made his try, weak as it was, and he had failed. But there was one man left—Sheriff Stockton. Dan squinted against the brightness toward the sheriff's office, but the glare was too much and he cut obliquely into the street.

The rumble of a freight-wagon pulled him back on his heels, and he let it and its grumbling driver pass. Four men directly across from him looked at him curiously, three Triangle hands with Ed Barrett, the neter. *They've probably never spoken to him before,* he found himself thinking. *Trouble makes strange combinations.*

The sheriff was still in his chair, still against the wall. He tipped it down when Dan came up. "Coyle's still in the *Blue Bell?*"

"Still waiting," Dan said.

STOCKTON got up and stretched. He was a big man, taller than Dan and wider, and in his day, Dan guessed, might have settled this with Coyle before this. Now the skin between his thick gray eyebrows was pinched together, giving his lined face a thoughtful, even sad, cast. "Waiting come hard to him?"

"He shows no signs of it," Dan reported truthfully. "Not drinking, either. Letting it stand."

"I guessed as much." The sheriff sat down again and stretched his long legs out on the walk. "So what's on your mind, Dan?"

"Triangle and Circle 12 will put their crews on Coyle if you want them to."

Stockton smiled gently. "That'd be pretty nice, now, wouldn't it."

"But only if you ask them," Dan said.

Stockton kept his gaze on his boots. "I've been wearing this star a long time, Dan. Never asked for help before."

"Maybe you didn't need it before."

"I had a wire from Caldwell," the sheriff said. "Coyle killed two men there last month." He held out his right hand and turned it over. It was steady; but the skin was dry and seamed and the fingers faintly gnarled. "I'm too slow—that hand's not what it was."

"In the *Blue Bell* or out here, then. What difference does it make?"

"I've seen it though," Stockton said

somewhat wistfully. "The wind puffs up suddenly, or a hawk throws a shadow between a man's eyes and the sun..." He sighed heavily. "Thanks, Dan, but I guess I'll go it alone."

He glanced down toward the *Blue Bell*. "Here he comes, Dan. You'd better get those kids inside your store."

Dan looked back. Wyatt Coyle had come out on the boardwalk and was standing there while a thin stream of men exited from the saloon behind him. The stream split, one current crossing the street and the other moving up toward Dan's store.

In a moment, Coyle paralleled the second stream and Dan guessed his intention, to come up even with the sheriff before crossing. That way the sun would be on his right, giving no advantage to Stockton.

Across the way, Wes and Clem Rath and Billy Brooks were on the edge of the walk. And Cora. She passed Dan in the middle of the street. From his own porch Dan saw her talking with her uncle, not hearing the words but seeing the sheriff shake his head stubbornly. Suddenly Cora lifted her face and kissed him on the cheek. "Get inside, Wes," Dan said harshly. He jerked his head at the other two youngsters. "You, too."

Up here the sidewalks emptied as Coyle approached, as if a wave of pressure running ahead of him forced the onlookers out of the clear and into the buildings. Rath and the others from the Blue Bell came in. Ernie was with them, breathing heavily. He leaned himself against the counter, half sitting on it. The youngsters were huddled at one of the windows, faces pressed against it.

CORA LOOKED at each of the men in turn, and not one of them met her eye. Curiously, out of this apparent willingness to let a man die, Dan drew a measure of respect for these men.

They had their code and they lived by it—and died by it. It was the sheriff's pride in himself as a man that made him ready to take what was coming, to go down fighting rather than ask for help. And these men were like him, strong, single individuals, willing to face certain death before humbling themselves.

But was it humbling one's self?

There was Cora. Like all women, forward looking. Thinking not of the now, but of the time to come, and wanting that time better than the present time. Not for herself, but for the children that were growing up into it. Wes and Clem and Billy.

Dan's eye fell on the sack of grub that Coyle had purchased at noon, mute evidence of the gunfighter's confidence.

Wyatt Coyle had stopped, five feet from the door, and turned to face the sheriff. There were words, the angry, arrogant accusation and the sheriff's quiet denial.

Charlie Rath said, "Come over here, Clem," but his son didn't move. He looked from his father to the scene outside and back again. Rath said angrily, "Get away from that window!" and then young Clem stepped back along the counter, Billy Brooks with him.

Wes came around and looked up at Dan solemnly. "The sheriff's doing what he has to, isn't he, Dad? But he's going to be killed."

"No, he's not," Ernie Brooks said. He came away from the counter, stumbled, and righted himself, lifting his gun from its holster.

Rath said, "Grab him, Bill," and lunged for him, throwing his arms around him.

Ernie yawed around, slamming his elbow into Rath's belly and throwing the lighter man off, and straightening flush into his father's fist. The blow sent Ernie jaggedly across the room. He fell heavily onto a nail keg, rolled off it, and lay on his back.

Dan leaned over him. *One man willing, and he had to be drunk!* The gun was there on the floor and he remembered Ernie's words: *All it takes is one bullet.*

Coyle's voice drifted in the door. "I'm waiting for you to draw, sheriff.

DAN PICKED up the gun and went out on the boardwalk. No one tried to stop him; no on had expected it of him. He said, "Don't move, Coyle, and without turning, "Wes, get that sack of grub." He lifted his voice then. "Somebody get his horse."

The sheriff called for Dan to stay out of it, but Dan ignored him. Coyle turned his head carefully. "This ain't your affair."

"I'm making it mine," Dan said. He felt Wes press the sack of provisions into his hand and he took it and moved down behind Coyle, keeping the gun on him. He tossed the sack out into the street, where it lifted cones of dust as it struck. "You take that and get out. And don't come back to Gunsight."

Slowly, everyone had been drawn back to the walks. They made a thick rim at the corners, a watchful gallery, a few of them glancing up street as Coyle's led horse appeared.

Coyle hadn't moved. The rigidity of his body reflected the indignity he felt at this exit from the town, and in a sudden burst of anger Dan lifted his foot and shoved him off the walk.

The gunman sprawled into the dust and came up, turning and spitting the dust out of his mouth.

Rath said sharply, "Watch him, Dan," but Coyle stood there his arms hanging. "You'll regret this, mister."

He beckoned to the man with his horse and leaned over for the sack, and then he was wheeling in a tight arc, his arm pumping at his side and coming up with his gun.

Dan fired and Coyle's bullet splintered glass behind him. He fired again and Coyle seemed to collapse toward him. The gunman hung on his knees and then tumbled sideways, knocking into the sack of grub.

Dan turned then and faced the men on the porch. "Any of you think I did wrong?"

From across the street, Sheriff Stockton, said "Dan, I told you to—"

"I'm not asking you, sheriff."

He handed the gun to Bill Brooks and they broke to make way for him. The shapeless heap that was Wyatt Coyle was in his mind, and he reflected that he knew now how it felt to kill a man and didn't like it.

Wes preceded him into the back room. Dan got his pipe and packed it, searching for the right words. "Don't think I'm proud of myself, Wes," he said finally, "but there was no one else to do it."

"It's like something I've heard you say, Dan," Cora said. She was standing in the doorway, regarding him soberly. "*A man sees what has to be done and does it.*" She smiled faintly. "Sometimes a woman does, too. I'll be stopping in here tomorrow on my way to school. And I'll keep stopping in."

She would, too, Dan thought, until he asked her. Well, he would.

★

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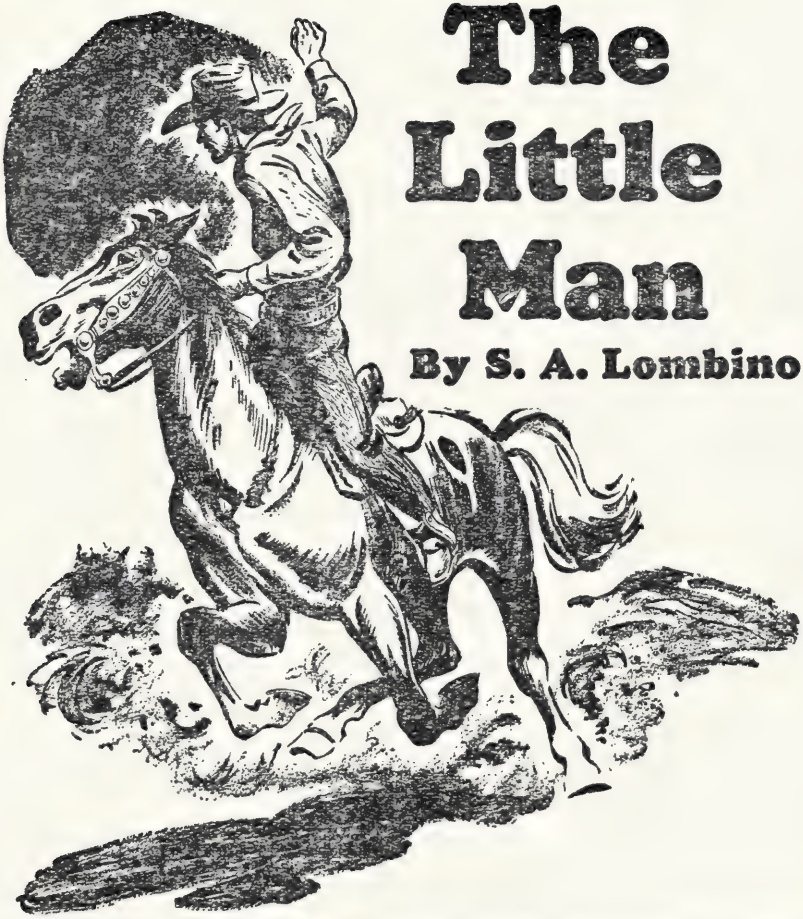
WESTERN ACTION



The Little Man

By S. A. Lombino

Ben McNeil wanted no part of murder and violence, yet it was brought to his doorstep. And he realized he didn't want to play the coward's role either.

THE BARBERPOLE outside the small shop was a simple affair, a shaved, slender birch that had been painted with alternating red and white stripes. It was implanted firmly in the soft earth alongside the hitching-rail, tilting slightly to one side from the number of drunks that had often clung to it for support.

Ben McNeill eyed the tilt of the pole as he inserted his key in the front-door lock. He wondered idly if he could ever put a pole in straight without having it lopsided again in less than an hour. He shrugged, turned the key, pushed in the door. Inside the shop, dust mots rose to greet the

early rays of sunlight that slanted through the glass shopfront. Etched in shadow on the rough plank floor, cast there by the black letters on the window, the word *BARBER* sprawled at Ben's feet.

He tilted his head in appreciation, left the door slightly ajar to let some air in. Outside, the street was deserted. He felt strange being up so early, being around and about long before the rest of the town was stirring. Almost like cheating. He grinned at his extream sense of fairness, realizing how foolish he was being. After all, it wasn't as if he were open for business. Fat lot of business he'd get at this hour, anyway. But it was high time he got his books in order, and he'd do it this morning or bust.

He'd been putting it off for a long time now, partly swamped by the rush of shaggy prospectors and trail-hounds, who flocked to his shop by the dozens; and partly just plain unwilling to tackle that mess of figures. But this morning, he'd do it. Get it over and done with once and for all. After that, it would be easy.

He passed by the large mirror before his single chair, glanced briefly at himself, and picked a hair from the brush laying on the wooden counter. He shrugged out of his jacket, parted the curtains leading to the small back room, and hung the jacket on a peg there. He took a white jacket from another peg, slipped it over his broad shoulders. He was of medium build, his shoulders wide for a man his height. His hair was straight, hanging over his forehead now in sandy disorder.

His face was not as brown as most of the other faces in town, mainly because he spent so much time indoors. And yet, he'd never longed for any life but the life he led. To Ben McNeill, cutting hair was more than a trade. It was his very existence, the thing he wanted to do most, here or anywhere.

He reached up for the heavy ledger on the top shelf of his cabinet, and was not surprised to see his own blue eyes smiling back at him from the mirror. Ben was a happy man.

He began humming a waltz, remembering how nice it had been to hold Janie in his arms last Saturday night at the dance. She was a good dancer, all right, light as a feather. He grinned, held the ledger at arm's length and whirled it around the room severtal times.

He stopped abruptly, looked around him hastily. Golly, suppose someone had seen him? How dang foolish can a man get?

He remembered the ledger, set his jaw in determination and curled up in the barber chair, facing the mirror. The street was still deserted, quiet and dusty in the early morning sun. He was scanning the row of figures, chewing the end of his pencil when he heard the hoofbeats.

BEN GLANCED up, looking into the mirror. A hatless rider on a blue roan rode into view, reining his horse sharply about in front of the barbershop. The rider didn't look into the shop at all, didn't even glance in its direction. His eyes were staring down the street, and Ben strained his neck for a view of what the rider was looking at. He turned in the chair, taking his eyes from the mirror and looking directly at the tall, blond rider. The rider wore dust-covered buckskins, a blue kerchief knotted at his throat. He was good-looking in a rangy, rough-hewn way, sitting his horse with the easy grace that comes from years spent in the leather. His wrist rested on his saddlehorn insolently, and Ben sensed a ruthless restlessness in the taut curve of the rider's back.

The rider's wrist suddenly dropped to his thigh, and he wiped the sweat of his hand on the dust-stained buckskins he wore. At the same moment, Ben heard the sound of more hooves in the distance. He kept watching the rider, saw his fingers tense on his thigh.

A sorrel rode into the frame that was Ben's front window, and the new

rider pulled his horse up several feet away from the man in buckskins. Ben's eyes widened as he recognized Tom Bowles, Janie's brother. The deputy star on Tom's vest caught the feeble sunlight, sent it shimmering away into the dusty street.

"I been wantin' to talk to you," Tom said to the stranger.

"What about?" The man's voice was deep, rumbling up from within his chest.

"A few head of steer been..."

The stranger's hand flicked to the .44 at his thigh holster tied-down with leather thongs. The gun coughed into the stillness of the street, its orange flame brighter than the sun's timid rays. Tom clutched at his chest, clawed for his gun with his right hand as the stranger's gun spit angry orange streaks again and again. Tom made a last futile stab at his holster, his hand wanting to grasp the butt, missing somehow. He tried to cling to the saddle horn, toppled from the sorrel, spilled in a crumpled heap in the dust.

The stranger pulled his horse around, slapped Tom's sorrel on the rump and shouted, "Hoora! Hoooooora!"

The sorrel galloped off down the street, dust rising like summer storm clouds behind its thundering hooves. The stranger turned then, glanced down at the still body of Tom Bowles, and then raised his eyes, looking straight into the barbershop. Ben tried to duck down behind the chair, realized it was too late, and lifted his eyes to meet the stranger's.

Their eyes locked and, for an instant, panic spread on the rider's face. His eyes quickly scanned Ben, and then a smile lifted the corners of his mouth.

"Well, hello, barber," he said, his voice deep and rumbling.

BEN KEPT staring at the man, thinking of Tom Bowles lying dead in the dust. The rider's gun was still in his hand, a faint wisp of smoke rising from the barrel.

"Come on outside, barber." He gestured with the gun.

Ben hesitated, looked at the gun, and then eased himself out of the chair. He put the ledger on the seat behind him, walked to the door, and stepped out into the street.

The rider swung down from his saddle, threw his reins over the rail, and ambled over to Ben. "Open kind of early, ain't you?"

Ben nodded, a tight, dry feeling in his throat.

"Bad for the health, morning air is," the rider said. He was grinning, and his teeth were even and white against the blond-red stubble of his face.

Ben looked at the dead deputy in the street. "Bad for Tom's health, anyway," he said.

The rider's grin grew broader. "Yeah," he agreed. He stroked his jaw, then said, "Little accident we had."

"Little murder, I reckon," Ben said.

The stranger's smile vanished, lost in the tangle of the growth on his face. "He drew against me fair and square," he said.

"He never knew there was gonna be a shoot-out," Ben insisted.

"You know, barber," the rider said, start grinning pleasantly again, "you shouldn't oughta open shop so early."

Ben didn't say anything. He kept looking at the rider's gun. Ben had never carried a gun, never wanted to carry one. He believed in the law the way he believed in his barber shop. And now the law was lying broken and lifeless in the dust. Janie's brother...

The rider lifted a rope from his saddle, quickly looped it around Tom's feet, tying the other end to his saddle horn.

"Hey!" Ben protested. "What in hell do you think..."

The .44 came up, level with Ben's stomach as the rider swung aboard the roan. "Shut up, Barber!" he said.

"You think you're just going to..."

"I said shut up!" The rider's voice boomed in the empty street, followed by a moment's silence as his voice

echoed off into the nearby hills. "I'll be back, barber. I aim to stick around a while." He paused. "You aimin' to do the same, you'd best forget everything that happened here this morning."

"I..."

"Take my advice, barber."

The rider dug his spurs into the roan, and the big horse started off down the street, the lifeless body of Tom Bowles trailing behind horse and rider, dust sprawling up into the air.

Ben stared at the retreating figures until they were out of sight. Then he walked back into the barber shop, closed the door, sat in his chair and stared at his reflection in the mirror.

THEY FOUND deputy Tom Bowles four miles from town, face down on the edge of a cactus patch. A lone prospector returning from his diggings discovered the body, hoisted it onto his mule and brought it into town at about five minutes to noon.

Zach Danner was in the chair when freckle-faced Bobby Ellis burst into the shop with the news.

"Don't that beat all though?" Zach said, shaking his head.

Ben waited with open scissors until Zach stopped wagging.

"Reckon your little lady's going to take this real hard," Zach said. His reflection raised eyebrows in the mirror, and his eyes met Ben's.

"I reckon so," Ben said.

Zach shook his head again. "Ain't no protection a'tall nowadays, Ben. Always the gun, always the gun that wins out."

"Not always," Ben said softly.

Zach nodded, convinced of the validity of his philosophy. "The little man don't stand a chance, Ben. Fellers like you and me, people just mindin' our own business. We ain't got a chance.

Ben thought again of the smiling stranger with the smoking .44, and a faint shudder flitted up his spine. "How do you mean, Zach?" He stared at his hand, realized the scissors were trembling in his fingers.

Zach turned in the chair, looked Ben full in the face. "What do people like you and me want, Ben? What do all the little people everywhere want? Guns and bullets? Fist fights, drunken brawls, pistol-whippings, hangings? Hell no, Ben. All we want is to live, that's all. We don't want no trouble from nobody. But we don't stand a chance."

Zach paused, pulled his hand from beneath the sheet and stabbed the air with his forefinger. "Look at young Tom Bowles. He's a farmer, danged good farmer. I should say *was* a farmer. So he gets deputized to help out with all this rustlin' business and bang! some'un puts a couple bullets in his chest."

"Zach..."

"Tom was just a little man, man like you and me, Ben. But the gun caught up with him." He shook his head again. "Nossir, we don't stand a chance. Not a goldarned chance. Nossir."

"Maybe," Ben said. He thought of the pale rider's threat, thought of Tom's bullet-ridden body, thought of the way the dust had curled around the figure sprawled in the street.

After Zach left, Ben thought some more. He'd have liked not to think about it at all, but every customer he served wanted to talk about Tom Bowles' death, and the more they talked, the more Ben could see the smoking gun in the stranger's hand. He wasn't afraid, he kept telling himself. It wasn't that at all. He'd never been afraid of anything. But what would happen if he *did* tell the sheriff? Suppose the stranger was watching him right this minute? Suppose the stranger saw him going to the sheriff, killed him before he'd moved three feet from the shop? What good would that do? Would another death help Tom Bowles, who was dead already?

He'd have to think about it. He'd have to think about it hard. If only he were a gunslick, a man with a quick

wrist and hard eyes, a man like the tall stranger...

No, no you couldn't build a country that way. You couldn't populate a land with gunslicks, one gun breeding another. There had to be the storekeepers, the barbers, the blacksmiths, the clerks. It was they who would win out in the end, and not the men who lived by the gun.

He bit his lower lip in consternation. Then what was a barber to do? What *could* a barber do against...

"Ben?" Her voice was soft, and the edge of grief clung to her throat.

He turned rapidly, dropping a sheet over the arm of his chair. "Janie. Janie." She came into his arms, and he held her close, the smell of her hair in his nostrils. This was all a man like Ben wanted. Just Janie, and a life of their own. Just peace and...

SHE WAS sobbing against his shoulder, her body shaking with her grief. An enormous guilt swept over him as the picture of the shooting came to mind again. But if he were the next victim, would Janie feel any better? There was no doubt in his mind that the pale stranger would kill him if he uttered a word about the shooting to anyone. And the stranger had known he wouldn't talk or he'd have killed him this morning.

"Just like...that," she was saying. "I...we had supper together last night, Ben. We talked together, laughed. I..." She buried her head in his shoulder again, then lifted it suddenly, the tears glistening on her dark lashes, spilling over and leaving a wet trail down her straight nose "Ben...will they get him? Will they get whoever did it?"

"I...I don't know."

"Do you think they will?"

"Yes," he lied.

She tried a smile that somehow crumbled on her lips. "Ben, oh Ben, thank the Lord I still have you."

He held her cradled in his arms, the guilt stronger in him now, flooding his being.

A discreet cough sounded from the doorway.

Ben looked up sharply, saw the dusty buckskins, the blue kerchief, the low-slung gunbelts, the bare blond head.

"Reckon a man can get a shave?" the stranger said.

Ben's heart thudded against his ribs. "You...you'd better go, Janie." He rushed her toward the doorway, and she grinned back bravely as she went into the street. He watched her pass by the big glass window and then vanish.

"Nice," the stranger said.

Ben curled his fists. "Who are you anyway?" he asked.

The stranger grinned, and his voice was rich when he spoke again. "They call me The Parson." He lifted one blond eyebrow; "they call me that because they say I have a preacher's voice." He chuckled softly. "You've heard of me?"

Ben gulped hard. "Y-yes," he said.

The stranger nodded acknowledgement, then patted the guns on his thighs. "Heavenly messengers," he said, grinning widely. "How about that shave?"

He walked gracefully over to the chair, slid into it. Ben threw the sheet over The Parson, the outlaw he'd heard so much about from drifting prospectors, drummers. This was The Parson, sitting in his chair; this was the man who murdered Tom Bowles; this was the law-of-the-gun sitting right here in his chair, in his barber shop.

The Parson moved the sheet so that he could easily reach his guns. Ben began lathering his face.

"Decided to keep quiet, eh barber?"

Ben didn't answer. He was thinking of Janie, wondering how it would be living a life with her, a life through which he carried a shameful secret in his heart.

"It's better that way," The Parson said. "You're a right sensible man."

Ben put the shaving brush on the counter, wrapped a towel around The Parson's neck. He held out his razor

strop, reached over for the razor with his other hand, and began briskly passing it over the leather.

"You don't talk much, do you, barber?"

Ben kept stropping the razor. "Not much to say," he said.

"Must be lots of exciting things happen to a barber," The Parson said, a faint touch of derision in his deep voice.

"I like the work," Ben said simply.

"Oh, don't get me wrong," The Parson hastened to clarify. "Must be awful interestin'."

Ben swung the chair back, and The Parson's hands moved up toward his .44's. He grinned as Ben stooped over him with the razor.

The razor scraped against the sideburn on The Parson's right cheek.

"You've got a tough beard," Ben said.

"Just go easy with that razor," The Parson advised. "I've got a sensitive face."

BEN KEPT scraping at the blond man's cheek, thinking again of the shooting he'd witnessed this morning, of young Tom Bowles questioning a man he suspected of rustling, and meeting his death suddenly and violently. He pinched his thumb and forefinger on The Parson's nose, scraped the beard from his upper lip. Quickly, he worked over the right side of the face, then scraped the left side clean.

"Tilt your head far back," he said.

The Parson eyed him sceptically, then tilted his head back confidently. Ben's fingers trembled as he laid the razor just below the blond man's Adam's apple.

The Parson's hands went to his gun butts. "Don't get any ideas," he warned. "You slit my throat, there'll be two of us bleeding 'fore long."

"Your guns can't stop all of us," Ben said.

"All of who? What the hell you talkin' about?"

"All the little men, mister; there's too many of us."

"You loco, barber?"

Ben's razor scraped harshly against The Parson's neck.

"Take it easy with that razor!"

"Sorry," Ben said.

He wiped the soap and hair off on a piece of brown paper, fell back to scraping. The Parson gulped, and his Adam's apple bobbed. Ben's hand shook as he applied the steel to the skin again. It would be so easy to slit the man's throat. One quick yank, with his left hand under the chin. One quick pull to the right, ear to ear, and there would be no more Parson. The law of the gun. The law of the gun transferred to the barber shop. And would that be a victory? Would that really be a victory? Could you wipe out every gunman in the country by putting him in a barber chair and slitting his throat?

No, that wasn't the way.

"Okay," Ben said. "All finished." He pushed the chair up, took a bottle from the counter and briskly rubbed some liquid over The Parson's face. The Parson surveyed himself in the mirror.

"Very nice, very nice. You're pretty good, barber."

"Thanks. Little water on your hair?"

"Sure." The Parson relaxed, his arms dropoing limp at his sides. "That shave sure feels..."

Ben swung around from the counter, the heavy bottle in his hands. The bottle swung downward with unerring accuracy, parting The Parson's blond hair in the middle of his skull. He saw the bottle coming, made an abortive reach for his guns before the glass crashed against his head. He slumped down in the chair then, his eyes blank.

Ben lifted The Parson's guns from their holsters, holding them by the barrels. He took them to the door, threw them out into the dust.

"Sheriff!" he called. "Sheriff!"

Then he stood over The Parson with a fresh bottle in his hand, while he waited for the law.

★

Digger John's Still

By A. A. Baker

All Gold Run watched, fascinated, as the little drama played out — as, day after day, Digger John planted a new barrel of his home-made whisky down on the boardwalk in front of Dredger Dan's bar, and the outraged Dredger hacked the barrel to pieces with an axe. But, soon, the circuit judge would come, and the law would decide who was in the right . . .

HARRY JIMPSON pulled a wide-legged chair onto the porch of Dredger Dan's Hotel and Saloon. He seated himself gently, so the red liquor in the full glass held a level, moved a bottle close to the shady side of a porch pillar, and hoisted a booted leg. The hot sun reached into the shade as far as his knees as he gazed in sleepy content down Gold Run's Main Street.

"Dredger..." called the lounger... "come out here." He waved his whisky glass into the sun and spat into the dusty street. Just below, a pibald jerked and the wheels of the buckboard creaked and pressed little ridges into the red dust.

The fat hotel keeper hurried out on the porch and stared down the street at Jimpson's point. "Look at them mountains," he said dreamily. "Look at them tall Sierras. Think about that snow high up there and how it seeps down through the roots of them trees and into the granite. That water, clean an' pure, is caught by all those little run-off creeks that lead into the American River. It's carried down into the Sacramento Valley an' is soaked into the roots of corn, what grows ten foot high, out of the peat land of the Stockton Delta..."

Jimpson sighed and lifted his glass with slow pleasure before he continued. "Ah, yes. Whisky-makin' corn. Grown by pure mountain snow water. Add sugar. from the cane, distill the mash, an' you get the finest whisky, bourbon whisky, this side of Kentucky."

"Yore just tryin' to put a fat cat on my back." Dredger's deep voice was controlled, but anger boiled behind his words. "Thet crazy Digger John and his distillery! A miner tryin' to make whisky is like a toad

tryin' to make pearls. His corn'll spoil an' sure as shootin', anybody fool enough to drink it will be poisoned."

"Tell him," chortled Jimpson, pointing with his glass down the street. "Here he comes with his first barrel."

The street was quiet, the dust was deep. People paused to watch. The men of the mountains were big, but Digger was just a little bigger. A bit wider, a bit taller. He had a dozen or so tin dippers hooked onto his belt and they clanked like the bells on a mule train. He was having trouble controlling a fifty gallon oak barrel. He would carry it for a few yards, until the sweat stood out on his red, whiskery face, then set it down and roll it erratically, until he had to stop and straighten his aching back as he grinned in all directions. Then Digger John hoisted the barrel again and staggered on. As he neared the hotel, his joyous words could be heard.

"It's the first batch. We're gonna celebrate. Gather in."

Several men hurried out into the street and tried to lend a hand but were brushed aside with a laugh. "I made her an' by gollies, I'm gonna deliver her. Stand back." He continued on and the friendly crowd followed.

They arrived at the hotel porch and Digger John tenderly stood the barrel on end and pulled a syphon from a pocket of his buckskin pants. He fumbled into a pocket of his red shirt and came up with a piece of chalk. With his tongue twisting about the corner of his mouth, the big man laboriously scrawled on the top of the barrel. *Digger John's Free Poison.*

"Come on up," he called heartily. "Get your cups, glasses or cookin' pots an' get ready to dive in. First run of the still. I want you all should give an honest opinion of it's taste an' general quality..."

DREDGER DAN errupted. He snatched a double-bitted axe out of the buckboard and advanced on the barrel, his face blurry with anger and his steps purposeful. Digger John raised a blank face as the crowd drew back and froze.

"It's pure poison!" the little hotel owner bellowed, and brought the axe down on the head of the barrel It bounced against the solid oak. The thud could be heard in lower town. "It ain't fit to drink..." again the axe belted and stove in a barrel-stave.

The red liquor spilled out of the splintered stave and gurgled into the dust, like thin blood. In fury, Dredger Dan slashed and hammered at the barrel until, with a slosh, it parted and the whisky spilled into the street and ran around Digger John's boots.

The west was filled with rough characters and California had more than its share. Men had been killed for bumping the elbow of a drinking man. A knife would flash, or a gun roar, over the possession of a dry seat on one of the rambling stage-coaches. Digger's body carried the scars of many fights; it was part of his everyday existence to loosen his sleeves, bare his broad freckled arms and move in. Or draw a bowie knife and cut his way through a pack of brawling teamsters, without a second thought.

But now, he stood and stared, his whiskery face congealed in the process of thought. What he had lost was not only whisky but, more important, pride of accomplishment. He'd struggled long hours in the distillery. Tending fires, stirring mash, adding burnt sugar coloring, until the liquor looked like whiskey, tasted like whisky and smelled like whisky. Now, when he had invited the citizens to participate freely, to see if it acted like whisky, Dredger had destroyed the barrel and let the total of all his efforts run out into the dust.

The gathered crowd had quieted. Dredger Dan stood boldly defiant, holding the axe loosely, waiting for Digger John's attack. The street

stretched away in the shimmering distance. The livery stable horsehead swung gently in the sun and the buzz of flies could heard. The Emporium Feed and Grain Store entrance was blocked by peering heads that seemed ready to dive into its dark interior, or take refuge behind the bales of hay that lined the sidewalk. A dog trotted briskly out from the alley, behind Dredger's hotel, stared at the gathering of silent men, halted and then worriedly retreated back into the shade. The long moment was electric. It was like the suspense filled moment when a fuse on a stick of explosive splutters and dies. Dredger, appalled at the continued silence of the big miner, began to shake and move his feet around. He gulped a big breath as Digger spoke.

"Yew. Yew half-pint of carbolic poison," he began conversationally. "Thet's about the worse thing any man ever done to me. Now a fella's got a right to say what reasons he had for bustin' my barrel. Just like..." Digger's voice began to climb... "a hangin' party gives the victim some last words."

TENSELY, Dredger released a sweated hand from the axe handle and directed attention to the sign over the batwings. "This," he shouted, "is a bar where whisky is sold. It's like a miner who's got the right to protect his claim from anybody jumpin' in an' diggin' the gold. I got a right to protect my business from any man figurin' to give away free whisky, right in front of my place of business. I got my rights to pro..." he was interrupted by an angry mutter from the crowd and a spiteful shout from Digger John.

"*I've* seen men die to protect their claims," he roared; "now we're gonna see a man die in defense of his saloon." He moved forward and Dredger recovered before Digger could reach his throat. The axe was swung again and the crowd frantically scrambled to safety.

The miner got a hold on Dredger's apron and wrapped the cloth about the axe-holder's head and laid mighty blows on the struggling man. The axe flew out of Dredger's hand, flashing in the sun as it raced away. A man yelled, "Look out!"

The shout was unheard by the approaching preacher. He was intent on the struggling men and didn't see the flailing axe until it struck him hollowly alongside the head. He went down and his block top hat rolled erratically away in the dust, reversed, and rolled back to where it's owner was sprawled. Blood gushed down the white shirt and seeped into the cloth of his black coat. In great wrath, he rose, sopped the blood from his neck and stomped determinedly and silently through the men and mounted the boardwalk. He stepped between Dredger and Digger and addressed the gathering.

"It might not be much of a wrong to kill a preacher," he said angrily, "but if a child, or a woman, had been passing, then they might be maimed or dead. It's time..." He broke off and snarled at Digger. "Let that man go!" Sheepishly, Digger loosed the apron and Dredger's red face appeared and gulped hungrily at the air.

"It's time," repeated the preacher, "that differences were settled by legal means. I don't know all the facts of this incident but there's law in California that will deal a fair decision. Let the law take it's course." He laid a thin hand on the miner's shoulder.

"*Sounds* fair, Preacher," Digger said amicably. "But can the law sop up the dust, strain it out and make my spilled barrel of whisky worth drinkin'?" He reached over and grabbed a handful of Dredger's vest. "Can the law make this varmint return my liquor? Can it make the last month turn back or bring back the mash? Can it recover the water thet run over the coils thet condense the steam? Can the whisky thet sops the dust be put back in the barrel so's we c'n drink it *today?*"

The crowd breathed in the aroma of the spilled whisky and muttered approval. A man in the back shouted. "Can the law replace the headaches thet a barrel of whisky c'n cause so pleasant-like?"

THE PREACHER smiled before he answered. "The law can't do the things you ask, Digger John. It can, however, make men live together so that the streets will be safe from flying axes. It can keep you from death before your time, and it can set costs and inforce the payment of damages..."

"Jest-a-minute," interrupted the hotel-owner. "They'll be *no* damages paid this...this..." He shook loose Digger's hand and stomped the sidewalk. "This is part of my property. Digger set his barrel right here. He's got no right to give away whisky on my property. Any court'll say so."

"Can the law," Digger had a gleam in his narrowed eyes, "Make this robber...this fat robber...pay for my lost likker?"

"I'm not a lawyer," answered the preacher. "The circuit court of California is in operation now. They'll sit sometime next month. For the sake of this community, take your case before the judge and settle this quarrel in a legal manner." He wiped the surplus blood from his neck and moved shakily toward home. Leaving the combatants staring thoughtfully after him.

Digger's voice broke the silence. His tone was edged. "Ever' three day I c'n fill fifty-gallon barrel full of whisky. So, ever' third day I'm gonna bring the barrel right to *this same spot.* I'm gonna see 'bout this legal way of doin' things. Yew c'n bust the barrel and let the stuff run into the street an' I won't mess with yew a'tall. I'll just set the barrel down an' give it away. Yew c'n bust her all to smithereens. Then, when the court sets...we'll see." He paused with a sudden thought and added a growled threat. "Yew danged near killed the preacher; I ought to bust yew for thet..."

"Thet preacher should'a been lookin'," Dredger shouted. "Anyways, it was mostly yore fault. If'n yew hadn't brung the barrel up here..." Anyways, I ain't afraid of goin' to the law. They'll see a business-man's reasons. Ain't I got a warehouse full of likker? Paid a big price for it. Bought it to sell. Hauled all the way from 'Frisco. Paid freight rates. Didn't you set the barrel on my property? How come I got anythin' to fear from goin' to court?"

"Yeah, yew got a warehouse," Digger spat. "Yew got one full of likker an' yew're the only one's got it. Thet's why I started my still. Yew raised yore prices three times in the last six months. I'll law yew, if'n thet's what it takes. I never saw a Judge yet who'd rule for a man who'd bust a barrel of likker an' let it run into the street. I'm settin' a high price on my labors. It'll be a dollar a slug, 'ceptin' to my friends who'll get it free an', the only one in Gold Run ain't my friend is *yew!"* He turned, kicked the broken staves under the walk, and strode toward his distillery.

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It was a long barn. There was a rich new smell mingled with that of pine boards, the sweetly acrid smell of mash. Sawdust covered the rough flooring and crunched with the crisp sound of new snow. An elusive sunbeam edged its way through the dimness and broke as the man passed into a cubicle office in the rear. Digger seated himself in a barrel chair, threw his feet on a desk and solemnly stared at the copper still that balanced firmly on the fire brick of the furnace. The copper lines running into the condenser tanks caught the vagrant sunbeams and winked at him.

Digger John just sat throughout the long afternoon. When the sun had called its beams in for the night, he rose and stoked a fire under the

still; opened a drawoff valve in a mash barrel and gingerly carried a few buckets of mash and filled the still. He banked his fire and returned to his seat to wait. A half hour passed as he intently watched the end of the condenser tube. When a trickle of alchohol dibbled out of the tube and crept down the inside of the glass container, he moved hastily to the thimble-full collected. He raised the tumbler to his lips and let the liquid burn its way down his throat. Digger hacked violently, spat, and made an adjustment in the fire before slowly returning to his office. The night passed with the smoke of his fire steaming over the sleeping town.

●

THREE days passed, then once again the big man lugged the fifty-gallon barrel up the main street. He staggered past the reservoir, gingerly set it down for a moments talk with the Preacher, then re-hoisted his burden and tromped past the feed store and circled out into the street as he made his way by the livery stable. He collected a following which promptly fell back as Dredger Dan hurried out onto the walk with the same axe. People gathered in the doors of houses and teamsters came down from their wagon lot.

Carefully, Digger set his barrel down. Immediately, Dredger advanced and smashed the keg. His back taut with fury, his arms stiff and his neck red, he banged at the oak staves until the barrel burst and the red liquid ran into the dust. The smell of alcohol floated into the quiet air, tantalizing the nostrils of the onlookers.

"Thet," Digger John said sorrowfully, "is barrel number two. By the time the court arrives, it's goin' to be about barrel number ten or eleven yew'll be charged for. Let's see, at a dollar a drink..."

"Dollar a drink!" shrilled the red faced hotel owner. "Thet likker'd kill rattlesnakes. Yew could make lye soap out'a yore rot gut."

"Now, how'd yew know?" Digger said mildly. "I don't think yew ever drank none 'cause if'n it'd kill snakes then yew'd be dead." He waited for the laughter to subside, then continued. "Howsome-ever, seein's we're gonna law this out, I'm makin' a good case of it. Ever' time I finish a barrel, I'm gonna set her down, right here on the board walk, an' give yew some exercise with yore axe."

"Yew *do* thet," Dredger snarled. "They'll all get busted an' I figger I'm doin' ever'body a favor. The law court'll hold thet I got rights to bust barrels of swill thet's deposited, without my express permission, on my propity. Thet's trespassin', thet is."

"I'll keep her up," called Digger. Swelling his back like a porcupine, he turned and tramped back to his distillery.

●

The days passed into weeks and every three days, Digger staggered his way up the street to set down his barrel then watch morosely as Dredger hacked it apart with his axe. The pile of barrel staves cluttered the street and a smell of bourbon drew flies and yellowjackets until Dredger's clients had to make a run for the batwings.

Art Terry developed a plan of strategy to avoid the stings of the hornets. He'd creep around the corner of the hotel, shotgun in one hand and a small tobacco-can of powder in the other. He would throw out the powder can and blast it with the shot gun. At the ensuing roar, he'd pull his hat low and rush for the batwings. It worked the first time but on the second try, a skittish drummer rushed out to see what had happened and he and Terry got caught flush in the doors. The hornets and yellowjackets had a field day; Terry's ears swelled until he had to cut holes in his hat like a drayman's horse's bonnet. After that, Terry just gave up and

stayed in Dredger's. The drummer left on the next stage for Sacramento where he tried to convince the legislature that Gold Run should be stricken from the map of California and declared a penal colony.

DIGGER JOHN grew thin. His constant anger wore lines in his face, but smoke continued to spout from the chimney of his locked distillery. Finally, the preacher caught him on one of his barrel marches and reminded him that the court would soon convene; and, at last, the circuit judge *did* arrive.

His name was Eli Bullack. He was tall, dressed in a long black coat and had mutton chop whiskers curling along his lean face. A red bandana hung from a pocket of his slit coat as, with great dignity and aplomb, he swung out of the stage in front of Dredger's hotel.

His cold blue eyes glared at the pile of barrel-staves and the hordes of flies. He sniffed haughtily at the odor of mash. The assembled crowd stood far back across the street to watch developements as the stage raced away.

From his roof, Dredger Dan waved his apron and shouted. "Jedge, get inside! Get inside 'fore them danged hornets get stirred up." His warning came too late. Judge Bullack, with good reason, had become aware of the danger and took off at a run after the stage.

A teamster jumped aboard one of the harness horses and caught the judge at the edge of town. He was taken to the preacher's house and, with persuasion, was convinced that he should stay and hear the case of Digger John, versus, Dredger Dan.

Word had spread through the mountains and into the mines around Placer county. Men drifted in until several thousand spectators were gathered for the trial.

Court was set up in the Teamster Lot. A table was brought out under the trees, a bailiff was appointed, the preacher was pressed into service as a courtclerk; and Judge Eli Bullack strode forward and seated himself behind the bench He banged heartily with a redwood gavel. The mass of spectators found their places and quieted down.

"This court is now in session." The judge had a carrying voice. "The mighty strength of the state of California is maintained by it's courts of law. From the blistering sands of Death Valley to the white capped peak of Mount Lassen..." His audience began to fidgit and decided the judge also liked the sound of his carrying voice. They returned their attention when he got personal: "...And further, so this court may be conducted with a minimum of interference, I direct your attention to a rifleman posted on the roof of Dredger's Hotel with orders to see that *my* orders are maintained." The judge coughed heartily, again banged the gavel and sat down.

"Will the disputants step forward?"

DREDGER DAN hurried up and was directed to a chair on the judge's right. Digger straddled a chair at the far end of the table. Judge Bullack drew back slightly from their glares before he again spoke.

"I'll ask you both to waive your rights to a jury trial. It's evident that this feud has been of some duration—approximately a month to be exact. It's evident therefore, that all assembled here have formed an opinion—have, in effect, taken sides. The

court has not. Are you both willing to rest your case in the court's judgement?"

Dredger nodded, but Digger asked a question. "Have you ever run into a case like this'n? Where a man with an axe busts up another man's whiskey barrels?"

"Not exactly," answered the judge. "But there are many cases in the law books concerning man's rights. I'm sure we'll find a case that fits.

"All right, Jedge," assented Digger. "I'll back yore jedgement."

"Now, let's have the facts. Let the complaining party give us his story." He waved a hand at John who rose to his feet.

"This is how she happened, Jedge. I run off the first barrel from my distillery. Thought the folks should he'p me celebrate. Thinking such thoughts, I lugged the barrel up to the front of the hotel. Dredger must'a been sleepin' with ants in his bed thet day 'cause he come chargin' out with an axe an' busts the barrel. The preacher got hit in the fight an' we agreed to law the matter. Since thet time," Digger continued solemnly, "I been luggin' a barrel up there ever' three days. Ever' three days Dredger's been smashin' 'em. I figger a man's got a right to give away his likker. If a man's hungry or thirsty, another man always gives him what he has to spare. Been thet way long 'fore courts come into bein'. Anyway..." Digger was halted by the judge's raised hand.

"All we want now are facts. Now, let's hear the other side."

Dredger swallowed and spoke up. "It's mostly like he says, Jedge. He's been puttin' the barrels on *my* boardwalk; I been bustin' said barrels. Goin' on a month. Him bringin', me bustin'. I figger I'm in business, likker-sellin' thet is, an' don't see what right Digger's got given it away. Right on my propity. I got maybe fifty barrels of good likker in my warehouse paid 'Frisco prices an' haulin' fees. An' here he is, givin' it away to ever'body 'cept me an' says he's gonna charge *me* a dollar a drink." Ain't likker made nowadays worth a dollar a drink."

The judge relaxed deep in his chair. The assembly stirred restlessly as they waited. Finally, Judge Bullack rose to his feet and firmly straightened his shoulders.

"Two stubborn men have created a waste that is inexcusable. One, has deliberately destroyed the property of another; the distiller has deliberately placed his property in jeopardy; I will render a decision that will take into consideration the facts and the motives of both parties.

"A man's property is sacred. It shall not be destroyed wantonly. Therefore, I assess Dredger Dan the fine of one hundred dollars. He also shall be required to reimburse Digger John the sum of one hundred dollars for the destruction of the *first* barrel of whisky."

THE CROWD hooted and Digger broke in. "Jedge, what about them other ten barrels? He busted them, too, same as the first."

"You put your own property in jeopardy after the first barrel was destroyed. You were warned and so this court finds you have no claim on the destruction of the other ten barrels." The judge banged his gavel. "Court's closed," he declared loudly and rose to leave but was held back by Digger's big hand on his shoulder. The judge tensed as his eyes fell on the holstered navy colt and the bowie knife that hung on the miners' gun belt. But Digger smiled and the judge relaxed and listened.

"I learned a lesson a long time ago, Judge. Never give a dog the second bite. After Dredger busted thet first barrel, I knew he'd be stubborn enough to keep right on bustin' them, especially after we agreed to go to law. I'll tell yew the truth 'bout thet whisky. Never could seem to get

the still to workin' right after thet first barrel. If'n I give her too much fire, she come out tastin' like sour mash. Then when I didn't stir her up, she burnt. Anyways, one thing after 'nother went wrong. Smelled like whisky an' looked like whisky, but never could stomach the taste. Ain't got no hard feelin' toward Dredger Dan, Jedge..." He paused and stared hard at Eli Bullack. "This law case *is* finished, ain't it?"

"Closed and settled. Decision's been rendered," answered the judge.

"You satisfied, Dredger?" Digger asked.

"Sure, Digger. Figger two hunert dollars is cheap for the fun I had."

"Then you figger them other ten barrels of whisky was worth 'bout ten dollars a barrel?"

"Nope," grinned Dredger, "but I'm willin' to pay it."

"All right then, yew keep the hunert dollars," Digger said. "Once you busted the first barrel an' I couldn't get the danged still producin', I been tunnelin' under yore warehouse..." a great spasm of pain seemed to twist Dredger's face..." "an' them last ten barrels of whisky was yore likker. Yew busted the barrels thet I stole outa yore warehouse." Several men jumped forward and grabbed the suddenly galvanized Dredger Dan as Digger turned calmly to the judge.

"Say, Jedge, was it unlegal for me to steal the whisky an' carry it up to Dredger's Hotel so's he could bust them with an axe?"

"Yes!" thundered the judge.

"Then if'n I pay Dredger Dan ten dollars a barrel, like he said it was worth for the fun, when he thought it was *my* whiskey, then we're square?"

"I don't know..." the judge's voice was a wail. "Give me time to think."

"Shore, Judge," Digger's words were soft. "Yew take the night to think her out. Come back in the morning."

Like a man in a daze, Judge Bullack wandered aimlessly toward the preachers house and the spectators dispersed with a louder buzz than the mash-mad hornets.

●

The morning dawned clear and the crowd again gathered. Judge Bullack settled himself behind the table and banged his gavel. His eyes were bloodshot and nervous lines of strain appeared across his high forehead.

"Court's in session." He turned to Dredger Dan who had the look of a man bound to an Indian torture-stake. "Have you taken an accounting of your whisky supply?"

"Yes, yore honor," snarled Dredger. "They's a tunnel drilled underneath thet leads to the distillery. The distillery's filled with dirt from the tunnel and..." Dredger keened... "they's ten barrels of my whisky missin'!"

THE JUDGE'S voice was harsh as he directed his next question toward Digger John's grinning face. "Do you admit that you did tunnel under the warehouse and steal ten barrels of whisky?"

"Yep. Shore did her, Jedge."

"For *that* crime," shouted the judge, "I fine you twenty dollars a barrel and order you pay said fine to Dredger Dan."

"All right, Jedge. Thet's a hunert I owe him. Two hunert less the hunert he's gotta pay for my first barrel. Right Jedge?"

The Judge banged the gavel. "Right!" he shouted.

"Then it's legal, an' lawful, for me to keep the whisky, Jedge?" A chuckle threaded Digger's voice as he asked the question

"What-do-you-mean?" Judge Bullack was pale with fatigue.

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Trouble At Revenge Hill

This was not the first time Sanders had been forced to move in.

He'd ridden out before where hoemen weren't wanted; he'd pulled his stakes and gone on, trying to avoid trouble. But now the time had come when Bert Sanders wouldn't run again.

By Ben Smith

THERE WAS nothing left but the rusted bones of the windmill, a heap of rain-washed stone where the chimney once stood, and a sour-smelling pile of ashes. From Revenge Hill across the flatlands stretched an endless panorama of desolation, broken only by the uplifted arms of cactus praying to the wind

and sand. A lizard lay upon his flat, hot rock and twitched his reptilian head from side to side. The sound of a steel-shod hoof striking rock alarmed him and he vanished as the wagon rolled into view.

There was a man on the high seat, a woman beside him. The man was y o u n g—possibly twenty-five—while the woman was a year younger. He pulled the mismatched team to a halt and sat looking toward the remains of what had once been a building. "Well," he said simply. "We're here."

The woman peered from under the brim of her poke bonnet but said nothing. Her face was brown with the sun and wind, her eyes were an unfaded blue. Her dress was long and full about her thighs, belted tightly at the waist with a sash of the same material.

The man climbed stiffly from the seat on the wagon in the manner of one who is unused to such means of locomotion. His eyes were brown and his hair, what of it could be seen beneath the curled brim of his sombrero, was crow's-wing black. He wore the tight-legged Levis and denim shirt of a cowman, rather than the high-bibbed overalls of a homesteader.

Sand eddied about his worn boots as he walked toward the ashes of the house. Already his active mind was bent on the problem of reconstruction. The stone from the chimney could be reused, the wooden watering-trough was evidently still sound, and the wind-mill would run again with a little labor and oil. For the time being tarpaulins would be both roof and walls of their home.

The woman, still on the wagon-seat spoke, and her voice was surprisingly liquid, the tones rounded as the sound of deep-throated bells. "There's a man on horseback," she said.

Her husband whirled, took quick steps toward her. "Where?"

She pointed to a spot a half-mile away where a thin copse of pine stood on the hillside. Revenge Hill was the last of a convulsive upthrust of the earth that had produced the range of mountains to the north. "He was in the open," she explained. "He rode behind those trees."

The man reached into the back of the wagon and brought forth a short-barreled Winchester. Cradling it over his lean forearm, he stepped away from the wagon to get the woman and the horses out of the line of fire.

BEHIND the pines on the hillside, nothing moved. "Bert," the woman said, "maybe he's friendly."

Bert Sanders grunted. "Out here they're all enemies. They don't like hoemen."

Her voice was quiet. "There have to be farmers."

"Sure, I know." Apology was in his words and, perhaps, a little shame. His hands, so lately turned to the rope and branding iron would illy fit the handle of a manure fork.

He checked his rebellious thinking. There was no money for the starting of a spread. He'd ride point on a cabbage patch and a milk cow from now on, since it had been her life. Now it must be his; there was no place for a woman at roundup, or wintering out in a lonely line camp.

He moved his eyes from the clump of pine to look at her. She had folded her slim fingers together in her lap, her bosom rose and fell with slighty agitated breathing, otherwise she showed no perturbation. She was thoroughbred, one in a million, and she was worth it. Maybe he'd get used to that manure fork.

The man on horseback, evidently he'd been looking over the situation safely from behind the trees, walked his animal slowly toward the wagon. He kept his hands high and in the clear. "*Buenos dias,*" he called when still a hundred yards away, "I come in peace."

Sanders said nothing, his brown eyes intent on the man's slightest move-

ment. The stranger wore fawn whipcord breeches and a chocolate shirt hand piped at the collar and pockets. His sombrero was white contrasting with the copper of his face. A pearl-handled .45 rode at his hip as if it were used to living there.

His keen eyes swept from Sanders to the wagon, the oddly paired team and then to the woman on the high seat. Only his face smiled, his eyes were still cold beneath his hat brim. "You are Senor Sanders," he said. His voice was soft, like water bubbling over limestone.

"News travels fast," Bert commented. He had relaxed somewhat, but the rifle still pointed over his arm.

"Yes." Again the stranger smiled with his face. "There has been no one here at Revenge Hill for a year. Word of your coming reached me yesterday."

He looked at the woman again. "I am Ortega," he said simply. "We will be neighbors."

Again his keen eyes searched the wagon and the woman, then, as abruptly as he had come, he rode away. Bert Sanders stood for a long moment, watching the dust settle.

"I don't like his eyes," his wife said. "They were like a snake's."

SANDERS took a deep breath. Purple shadows reached from the mountains toward the flatlands as he fished the tarpaulins from the load on the wagon. From far away came the bawling of a calf. Sanders' face was a queer mixture of perplexity and sadness as he started to work.

But Ruth Sanders watched her husband as he went about, noted his uncertainty. He did the unfamiliar tasks with a discernible awkwardness and, once, while he was hobbling his cow pony, who had pulled in strange harness with the plow horse to make their team, she saw him absently stroking the pony's muzzle and looking toward the night-laden hills.

He's like a stranger, she thought. *Lost in the very land he was born in.*

With the sun gone for the night, she removed her stiff-brimmed bonnet and sat by the fire, combing her long hair. The moon looked over the edge of the world, decided it was a good place, and climbed to flood the desert with silver. From afar a coyote yapped shrilly, the sound echoing from hill to hill until its source was lost.

"Bert." He was sitting near her in the sand, looking out across the desert.

He turned to look at her. "Still worried about Ortega?"

It was as if a chill had come with the words. "No," she replied. "I'd forgotten him."

He laughed, but there was no humor in the sound. "He'll be back."

"If there'll be trouble here, why did you come here?"

"Because we couldn't afford any better."

Bert clasped his hands about his knees and leaned back. "Land comes high to the hoemen."

She felt the bitterness in his words, knew the deep sadness he found within him. Her eyes were sober as she looked at him. "The people who were here before...?"

He made a decisive gesture with his flat hand. "Burned out. Driven away."

"By cowmen?"

He turned again, looking full in her face. "I suppose. Why?"

"And, yet, you want to be one of them?"

In the face of her words there was no apt answer, yet deep within his blood was the smell of cattle, the noisy herds and the salt sweat of hard labor. She knew he would be divorced from his desire only after the greatest struggle, and she was willing to wait. The question that came to her mind was did he share her willingness, or did he resent her because she had made his way of life new.

"Time to bunk down," Bert said

abruptly, not looking at her. "Long day tomorrow."

IT WAS AFTER noon the next day before Sanders got the balky windmill repaired and pumping water. For some reason, most of the gear work was undamaged and the well itself was clean. Out of Ruth's hearing, atop the spidery framework, he bitterly cursed the inanimate machinery as if it were responsible for his frustration, but when the gurgling stream of water hit the dry trough and his two horses drank greedily, he felt a strange thrill of satisfaction. For a man who had known only bawling calves and branding irons, it was an accomplishment. He was whistling as he turned to the next task.

After water, a house was the prime need and, since there were logs aplenty a mile away, he left the camp and rode toward the hills, bent on finding and cutting down some pine. It was hard work, more difficult than repairing the windmill; the axe was unfamiliar to his hands. It was late in the afternoon when he heard the sound of the explosion.

He found Ruth standing near the ashes of the old house, the windmill was silent, a twisted pile of wreckage. "There were three of them," she said. "They used dynamite."

Too full of defeat to do more than stare stupidly, he sat wearily on a rock. "Ortega's men?"

There were lines of bitterness about her mouth. "The horses were branded with a Lazy O," she replied.

Bert got to his feet, a slim figure in his worn boots and Levis. When he came out of the tent, he was buckling his worn .45 about his hips. "This is one thing I understand," he told her.

"You're not going over there?" Her concern was a living thing making her throaty voice tremble.

"No." For the first time in days she saw him smile. "I'm going to fix me a windmill. When I get that done, they'll be back."

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But it was Ortega himself who called the next day. He was riding a palomino, and the sunlight bounced from the colored sets in the martingale. "*Dias*," he called softly.

Sanders walked toward him, anger stiffening his back. "The windmill's turning again, Ortega," he said bitterly. "Time to call in your boys."

The man was too intelligent to attempt to deny what was too well known. "So?" He rolled a brown cigarette between his bronzed fingers. "You are apt at repairing machinery?"

"Some." Bert's eyes narrowed. "Also using it. The next time your men come calling they'll get holes punched in them."

Ortega saw Ruth Sanders watching him and he laughed, his teeth startlingly white against his dark face. His black eyes took in every detail of her slim figure in the brief glance.

"You are very rash, *amigo mio*," he said. His voice was low, but there was velvety steel in its undertones. "If you had the sense of a *conejo*, even a rabbit of little intelligence, you would leave and take your woman with you."

Sanders felt the touch of ice at his spine. For the first time he was aware of a fear for Ruth's welfare. Before he had imagined that the battle would be man against man and the women would be spared; but it was apparent that Ortega fought with all weapons, used all means to his objective.

AFTER HE had gone, Ruth joined her husband near the crippled, though turning, windmill. "You're right," she said abruptly. "We've no business here."

He turned angrily. "And leave this for Ortega?"

She looked at him, silently pleading that his wrath be not for her, but there was something tangibly unsatisfactory between them. Something that seemed to be growing with the

passage of the days. She sighed and turned away.

A vague uneasiness grew within Bert Sanders in the days that followed; Ortega and his men were quiet, too quiet, and trouble mounted above the hills like black thunderclouds. Bert's slim, windburned face grew haggard and his replies to Ruth's questions were more apt to be sharp rejoinders. Bitterness mounted like a spring freshet between them until, while she worked with him, Ruth avoided conversation with her husband. It was so apparent that he loathed the life he was leading, and she began to blame herself more and more for being the cause of it.

●

It was a week later that Ortega returned, this time another man was with him. The stranger was a hatchet-faced cowman wearing two guns besides having a Winchester scabbarded under his leg. He merely sat on his gelding and watched with a half-sneer as the gaudily dressed Ortega did the talking.

"Senor Sanders," Ortega's soft voice had the grate of steel in it, "Can you be persuaded to leave here?"

"No," Bert stood stiffly, watching the man.

Ruth stood nearby, she had traded her long dress for a pair of Levis and checkered shirt, but the rough clothing did nothing to detract from her loveliness. There was sadness in his eyes. "Senor," said Ortega, "we have played this game long enough. Will money buy you?"

"No," Bert's voice was flat, emotionless.

Ortega shrugged. "You are no farmer; you wear the gear of a cowhand. Why do you hold so stubbornly here?"

"Because this land is mine."

Ruth Sanders spoke for the first time and her voice was low and throaty. "Let him have it, Bert," she said. "We can go somewhere else."

Her husband turned on her almost savagely. "It's the same everywhere. Nobody wants a hoeman on his land. There's no room in cowcountry for a farmer."

Ortega sat silently, watching the byplay. For the first time he seemed to see another conflict other than the one between himself and the cowpuncher turned farmer. His dark eyes were thoughtful. Almost unnoticed by Bert and his wife, Ortega and his companion rode away.

"Tomorrow," Ortega said when they were out of earshot, "you will take men and round up a herd from the hills. Young, agile stock which should be active so close to the desert."

He paused and stared solemnly between the jogging ears of his palomino. His companion grinned brutally, already he could see the chaos to be caused by a herd of steers driven through the farmer's encampment.

JUST AFTER daybreak, close to a hundred steers started to move from the hills toward the flatland under Revenge Hill. Ortega's companion of the day before, Jake Little, and two of his men, hazed the shambling animals into some semblance of a line and directed them toward the towering windmill. Jake rode off point, where he would be in the best position to see the forthcoming destruction, and smiled to himself. By ten o'clock the hoeman, Sanders, would have little more than a memory, beaten into the dry earth.

Ortega rode from the trees on Revenge Hill, walking his palomino toward Sander's camp. He had so timed his approach that he swung to the ground while Jake and the herd was almost a half-mile away. Sanders came out of the improvised tent, carrying his six-shooter in his hand. "Get out," he grated, "Get off this land, quick."

Ortega stood calmly, watching him. He noticed that Ruth Sanders was

standing close behind her husband. Ortega stooped, grasped a fistful of the dry dirt. "You would die," he asked, "for this?"

Bert stood silently looking at him. Ortega opened his hand and the dust filtered to the ground like a miniature waterfall.

Ortega said softly: "I will have no farmer on my land, nor near me."

Bert motioned with his six-gun. His face was tense, and his knuckles were white where he grasped the weapon. "Get out," he said again.

The woman behind him said nothing. The trotting herd was less than a quarter-mile away now, moving faster. They could plainly hear the whoops of the tailer as he pushed the cattle forward. Calmly the two of them faced Ortega, Bert a little in front of his wife.

"I said," Ortega repeated, and his voice was as soft at the passage of a snake through high grass, "I will have no farmers on my place, nor near me."

He took two quick steps, his body moving lithely in his gaudy whipcord, and swung aboard the palomino. Sunlight flashed from the silver in the saddle and from the sets on the tasselled bridle. Facing the oncoming herd, he shouted: "Bunch them around the water trough. They'll drink and stay."

Cursing protestingly, Jake rode from point, and he and Ortega spoke together. Shrugging, Jake rode back to the bunched steers. Letting up on their push, the men behind headed the cattle to the water, then rode off a hundred yards or so, to watch.

"Sanders," Ortega said abruptly, reining his mount in close to the stupified Bert. "I said there'd be no farmers, and I meant it. You're a cowman now. There by the water trough is the start of your herd; you can pay me back after you build a brand."

He whirled and the hooves of the palomino spurned the dry earth. "I know only one thing," he said over his shoulder, and this time his eyes smiled, too, "and that is courage. Courage I respect."

BERT SANDERS said, "Why do you suppose he did that?"

She smiled enigmatically, in the manner of a woman who knows the answer. "Perhaps he's growing old and soft. Perhaps..."

"Perhaps, what?"

"Nothing." She took her husband's arm and together they watched Ortega and his men vanish around Revenge Hill.

"Boss," Jake Little protested, as he and Ortega rode ahead of the other two men, "Why that crazy play?"

Ortega stared thoughtfully at the brass stud on his horses bridle. "I respect a fighter," he replied, "and that man was engaged in the hardest fight of all. He was combatting one thing he loved, for another thing he loved even more."

Jake Little muttered something beneath his breath and swung his gelding away from Ortega. For that reason, he did not see the strange look in Ortega's eyes, nor did he hear the softly murmurred words.

For Ortega's mind was full of the picture of Ruth Sanders as she stood resolutely behind her husband. He sighed sadly. "In fact," Ortega said to his horse, "I would like to be Senor Sanders today. I envy him."

★

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PAYMENT FOR A PARTNER

A gent who can make cards do tricks doesn't deal someone two aces of spades — or does he?

BUCK BENTON reached the little hill settlement about mid-afternoon. Jim's letter had said: "If something goes wrong, check in at Baldy's saloon. You'll pick up some information there. Use your own judgment about disclosing your identity."

Well, something had gone wrong, all right. Jim was dead from three shots in the back.

Buck tied his horse in the shade beside the saloon, walked around to the front and entered. He hesitated inside to accustom his eyes to the shaded interior.

"If you want something," proclaimed a voice to Buck's right, "I'll get up. If you're just dodging the sun, I won't."

Buck turned and grinned. Seated in a rocking chair before an open window was the saloon owner. He was stripped to undershirt, sock feet propped on the window sill.

"Keep sitting," said Buck. "Sure hot, ain't it?"

"Uh-huh. Saw you ride in from the north. You must be loco to leave the cool up there an' head south."

"Gets hot up north, too, this time of the year."

"Yeah. Reckon it's hot everywhere."

Buck shaped and lighted a cigarette. "Know where a cowpoke might get on around here?"

"This time of year? Hell, nothing stirring now but the heat waves."

"Uh-huh. Found it that way everywhere. Guess I'll just have to keep on moving and looking."

There was a plop-plop sound from outside as hooves fell in the street dust. Baldy peered out, then reluctantly started pulling on his shoes. "Here they come again!"

"Who?" Buck was mildly curious.

"Them Box H poker players. That same four shows up every day about

this time to sit in th' shade and play stud. Make me play with them for a five-handed game." Baldy heaved himself from the rocker and reached for his shirt.

"Say, that's an idea. Dobie might hire you just to have you around for a five-handed game. Take a look out th' window. That's Dobie Harvell on the pinto. Them two on his right is Turk Grebson and Jake Tandy. Grebson is Dobie's guardian until Dobie gets of age. Tandy is a friend of Grebson. That other feller is Dusty Smith, Box H foreman. They have been taking Dusty lately, and I don't think he is going to realize much for this year's work.

Buck Benton was glad Baldy moved away to prepare for the newcomers. His eyes grew hard as he looked at three of the riders. This was the trio Jim Tucker was trying to deal with.

Three weeks ago Jim had come up here, hoping to get a long-time contract. He expected to deal with one man, Dobie Harvell, young heir to the immense Box H spread. But Jim wrote that he was having to deal with three men, and wasn't making much progress. He said young Harvell at first seemed willing, then suddenly changed his mind. The other two that Jim named were Grebson and Tandy.

There was no further word from Jim Tucker, for two weeks ago he was killed. There were three bullets fired into his body, from behind. Either shot would have caused death. All three shots could have been fired by one man, or one shot each by three men.

As soon as he heard, Buck Benton hit leather. Fifty miles from the settlement Buck exchanged his B-T steeldust for a less conspicuous mount and circled the settlement to come from the north. He intended to pose as a drifting rider in search of a job, until he learned who killed Jim Tucker.

For he had a payment to make for a partner. They had bumped into each other six years ago, both riding

grubline to see what was over the next hill. They bummed together a few weeks, drinking and gambling a little, and trying to outdo the other in riding and roping and shooting. In the end they were still even. So both bought drinks, shook hands and they became partners.

They started the Benton-Tucker Cattle Buying Company. In five years they built their company into a substantial concern. Jim worked north, Buck to the south, and the B-T Company became well-known and well-liked. Then Jim went after the biggest contract of their partnership. Now Jim Tucker was dead...from three bullets in the back.

THE QUARTET hitched their horses in the shade where Buck had left his mount. Buck's manner was unconcerned as the men entered the saloon.

All four glanced at Buck as they tromped to the bar. Baldy had drinks poured and waiting. Dobie Harvell picked up his glass and turned. "Care to join us, stranger? I'm buying."

Buck Benton lazily arose. "Sure."

He felt their gazes as he strode to the bar. Baldy set out and filled another glass. Benton picked it up and said: "Here's luck, fellows."

They took the drink, then three of them reached for papers and tobacco. The one called Tandy drew a cigar from a vest pocket and lighted it.

As Harvell made his cigarette, Benton covertly studied him. Harvell was slender, wiry. His clothing was costlier than usual cow-puncher garb. But that was to be expected since Harvell was heir to the rich Box H spread. He raised his eyes suddenly as he

lighted his cigarette. For a moment his gaze met Benton's sharp scrutiny. Then Harvell looked quickly away.

Dusty Smith was red-headed, lean, and appeared a good-natured tophand. Right now he was frowning. Recalling Baldy's remark about Dusty's steady poker losses, Buck supposed that was on Dusty's mind.

The other two men merited more consideration. Turk Grebson was middle-aged, with thick body on stout legs. His heavy brows were drawn in a scowl. An unfriendly glint lurked in his eyes. Buck Benton realized this man would make a ruthless enemy.

Jake Tandy, the fourth man, was tall with penetrating black eyes. He wore customary range garb, but there were no work callouses in his hands. The fingers were long, sensitive, seemed fitted from useage to work other than that of a cowpoke.

Buck Benton turned back to the bar. "Fill 'em up again, one for yourself. I'm buying."

While they waited for the drinks, Grebson spoke. "Hot down your way, stranger?"

There was a sharp challenge beneath the cordial inquiry. Buck sensed it, but pretended he had not. "Don't know about down, mister. Was pretty hot up in Dodge City ten days ago though. Can't be any hotter anywhere than it was there."

"Hot everywhere this time of year," said Baldy, picking up his glass. "Well, here's looking at you, mister."

They drank. Benton brought out a roll of bills. He peeled one off the roll and tossed it onto the bar. Baldy's eyes widened. "Say. . . thought you was riding grubline. Hell, you've got enough there to choke a horse."

"I was lucky at Dodge City," grinned Buck. "Ran forty bucks into almost four hundred in a poker game."

Tandy's eyes slid from the roll to Grebson. Almost imperceptibly Grebson nodded. Benton had trouble smothering a grin. His money had made him welcome. "Perhaps," said Tandy invitingly, "you'd like to play stud with us. We usually have Baldy sit in. But possibly you'd like to take his place?"

"Might as well. Too hot anyway to ride on south looking for a job."

"A little more luck like I've been having," said Dusty Smith, "and I'm liable to ride with you."

THEY AGREED on a dollar limit stud game. Dusty won the first two pots and pinched himself to see if he was dreaming. For about an hour they played along, first one and then the other winning. Tandy seemed to be the biggest loser, and called for a new deck of cards.

Dusty dragged in a ten dollar pot and bought a round of drinks. A few hands later Grebson's three kings were winners, and he bought a round. Instead of sitting at the window where it was cool, Baldy had drawn up a chair and was watching the game.

There was little conversation. They gave their attention to the game. All except Dobie. The young Box H heir hadn't won a pot, and seemed to be pondering something. Once or twice Buck Benton caught Dobie regarding him intently. Each time Buck met the other's gaze, Dobie glanced quickly away.

"What's chances for a job around here?" Buck shuffled the cards. "Does Box H need any hands?"

Buck was looking across the table at Dobie. But it was Grebson who answered. "Not until roundup. Maybe not even then."

"Hell, I heard some cattle buying outfit was dickering with Box H for its entire herd, and figured you'd need some hands."

"That deal fell through," said Grebson flatly. "Go on, deal."

As he dealt, Benton pretended not to see the glances Tandy and Grebson exchanged. Nor the tautness that crept into Dobie Harvell's young face. Buck wondered if they each had fired one of those shots into Jim's back, or if one of them had fired all three.

Baldy arose and gathered up the glasses. He'd caught the tension Buck's remark created. Only Dusty Smith seemed unaware of it.

"House is buying this round," said Baldy.

The deal went on while Baldy poured the drinks. Grebson won the pot with two small pairs. It was Dobie's turn to deal.

Baldy brought the drinks as Dobie shuffled and placed them about on the table. Dobie finished the shuffle and shoved the deck to Tandy to cut. At that moment Grebson reached for his drink and clumsily knocked it over.

Each man grabbed up his chips from the spreading whiskey. Grebson spat an oath at his awkwardness. Baldy wiped the table dry and the players replaced their stacks before them.

"Go ahead and deal." Tandy shoved the deck to Dobie. "Cutting wouldn't improve my luck today."

Dobie dealt the hole card and the first up card. Benton had the ace of spades in the hole and the queen of diamonds up. Across the table, Dobie was high with the king of clubs. He opened for a half dollar.

Everyone called. Buck Benton's next card was the ten of hearts... three going on an ace-high straight. Grebson was high now with the ace of diamonds. He bet and the others called.

The next up-card gave Dusty Smith a pair of fives. Dobie, Grebson and Buck Benton called, then Tandy raised a dollar. His high card was the jack of spades. Dusty did not raise back, indicating he had only the pair of fives. The rest of them called and Dobie dealt the third up-card.

Buck drew a king, making four cards on the straight, needing only a jack to fill. No one paired. Dusty checked his fives and Dobie passed. Grebson hesitated a moment, then passed. Buck shoved out the limit. "If I hit, my straight's boss. I'll bet a dollar."

"Two, you mean," said Tandy. I'll raise a dollar."

Dusty called with his fives. Dobie decided to string along. Grebson dropped out, Buck met the raise.

"The last card coming up." Dobie picked up the deck to deal. "So read 'em, men, and weep."

Buck got the first card. As it came to rest before him, a startled glint came in his eyes. It was the ace of spades...and he already had that card in the hole!

Dobie completed the deal, with no one helping. Dusty was still high with his pair of fives. He checked, as did Dobie, and it was up to Buck Benton. "I don't think," said Buck quietly, "this pair will win."

He turned over his hole card, shoved the two aces of spades together.

"Hell!" Dusty Smith's surprised oath joined a gasp from Baldy. Dobie Harvell stared tensely at the two aces of spades.

Grebson and Tandy edged back from the table. It was apparent they expected Buck to challenge Dobie, and wanted to get out of the way.

But Dusty Smith jumped up, his hand near his gun. "I'm the sucker in this game. I've been all along." His hard, flat voice whipped at Dobie. "You've lost yourself a foreman, mister. I'm going for my bedroll and gear. Figure my time and leave it with Baldy. I'll pick it up on the way back."

Dusty Smith backed away and went out. Grebson's and Tandy's glances met, then shifted questioningly to Buck Benton.

"I think," said Buck arising, "the game's over, fellows."

BALDY OFFERED a free drink but no one accepted. Buck Benton put his money away and strolled over to the bar. Grebson and Tandy arose, walked toward the door. Tight-lipped, Dobie Harvell went to the bar to leave a check, muttered a few words, then joined his waiting companions.

In a few moments they rode from the settlement.

"You don't look like you'd be so hard to prod," said Baldy.

"I'm looking for a job, not a fight," said Buck Benton.

"Like hell. You ain't no grubline rider. You're Buck Benton, Jim Tucker's partner, and you didn't come here just to sit in the shade. Now don't try to deny it. 'Tweren't me who guessed. It was Dobie. Here, he said give you this."

Baldy leaned over and handed Benton a ring. Buck didn't need a second glance to identify it. He had given it to Jim as a present two years ago.

"Dobie said tell you to sit tight until he got a chance to see you alone. He'll be back sometime tonight."

Benton fingered the ring. He made no denial of his identity. Apparently there was no further need.

"Jim had three bullets in him," said Buck. "And his trip was a failure because of a little difficulty—with three men."

"I know. That deck had two aces of spades, too. But Dobie Harvell didn't put 'em there."

"No?"

"Hell, if he'd been clever enough to stack the deck, do you think he'd deal that foolishly? Two aces of spades to the same man is an invitation for trouble. Not even the best of cardsharps invites trouble that way."

Baldy lighted some lamps. He took one and went into his living quarters partitioned off behind the bar. He raised his voice. "Gonna stir up something to eat. Give a yell if anyone comes in."

Buck nodded and rolled a cigarette. He wondered what the next move would be in this puzzle surrounding Jim's death. Jim never carried enough cash to make him a robbery victim. He was too good a business man to incur anyone's death-dealing ire. It was something else—something vague and sinister. Buck Benton frowned as he wondered. Then Baldy invited him to come and eat.

They stacked the dishes, returned to the coolness of the open window. Dark had fallen. Buck mentioned he had better take his horse to the livery stable, when they heard a horse loping down the street.

The rider pulled up in front of the saloon. A voice called: "It's me, Dobie Harvell. You still in there, Buck Benton?"

Buck had expected Dobie would return more secretively. But since he hadn't...

"Yeah," he said, going to the door. "Come on in..."

The rider's gun hand dipped up. Two shots rocked the night. Hot lead ripped the door facing mere inches from Buck's head. He dived back out of the silhouetting lamp light. His hand leaped up with his gun. But he did not get a chance to shoot. For the rider wheeled and fled.

They both looked out and Baldy swore. They could not discern the features of the rider. But both identified the horse. It was the pinto—Dobie Harvell's pinto.

"Maybe he did stack that deck!" Buck Benton holstered his gun and hurried to his horse. He mounted and spurred after the fleeing pinto.

In the saloon doorway, Baldy shook his head. "It's the dam' heat! First he stacks a deck when he ain't never cheated. Then he misses twice from twenty feet away when usually he drives tacks at a hundred. It's the heat, that's what. Dobie's gone loco from the heat!"

AHEAD OF him, Benton saw the pinto speeding furiously across the flats. Its dust-fog was easily discernible by the light of the moon that had come up and hung poised over the valley. Benton gave his horse its head and sped in pursuit.

Abruptly the pinto cut from the flats and headed for timbered foothills. Benton reined his horse, tried

to make a short cut. But the pinto was still out of sixgun range when they reached the foothills. Scrub timber and brush slowed both mounts. From ahead came the rending of limbs as the pinto floundered through. Then suddenly, there was no more noise. The pinto had been stopped.

Benton rode with wary alertness, hand on his gun. He came to the edge of a clearing and quickly reined in his horse.

In the clearing was a small line-cabin, a one-room, rough-board structure. The pinto stood off to one side, breathing heavily from the gruelling race it had run.

Benton dismounted and crept behind the shack. It had a front door and two chest-high small windows that swung inward. The door and windows were shut. Buck approached the shack from the back.

He chose the side of the shack in the shadow of the moon. Carefully he peered around, then crept beneath the window. There was no sound from inside. Cautiously, gun ready, Benton straightened and peeked through the window.

Dobie Harvell was in the room. Instantly Buck lifted his gun and started to call a challenge. Instead he frowned, looked more closely, puzzled. Harvell was seated in the center of the room, facing the door, with a gun in his hand.

"What the!" ejaculated Buck Benton. For Dobie Harvell was directly in the moonlight shining through the east window, instead of crouched in a shadowy corner. Harvell wasn't that dumb, by any means.

"Harvell," Buck called softly. "Harvell, it's me, Benton."

But the Box H heir did not move. Buck stared more intently, uttered a sharp exclamation.

Harvell was bound in the chair, a gag in his mouth, the gun tied in his hand. Hogging strings held each ankle to a chair leg. A lariat around his chest kept him upright in the chair. Harvell's own neckerchief was the gag, and a bandana tied the gun in his hand.

Suddenly, Buck Benton had the answer. With an oath he dived head-first through the window. Two quick shots from behind followed. Hot lead nicked a bootheel as he went through.

Buck rolled free of the smashed window glass, ignored a few slight scratches. He pulled Dobie into a shadow, removed the gag and lariat.

"I didn't stack that deck!" were Dobie's first words.

"I know that, now." Benton stationed himself near the window through which he dived. He motioned Dobie to cover the other one. "Neither did you kill Jim Tucker; that answer is them two out there. But why?"

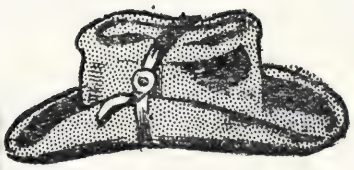
"Turk Grebson is dad's cousin and the only heir to the Box H if I'm out of the way. But it has to be done so that no suspicion falls on Turk since he'd be first suspect if anything did happen to me. He brought in Tandy to help work it out. They decided to make someone else the goat." Dobie spoke softly but swiftly, scanning the bushes outside.

"They planned to kill us both the night they got Jim. Meant to make it appear we had quarreled and killed each other. Jim and I started to town. But I turned back to the ranch when my pinto threw a shoe. They jumped Jim before they realized he was along. When Jim went for his gun, Turk let him have it in the back. No one saw it, of course. But that's the way the sign read when Dusty and I found Jim next day.

"I knew you'd be along, so I kept Jim's ring and other stuff."

"Yeah. Thanks," said Buck.

"They seemed to tame down after Jim's death, and we began playing stud at Baldy's to break the monotony out at the ranch. I should have realized Tandy was stacking the deck so Dusty always lost, always to me, always on my deal. Tandy would sit



behind me, stack the deck when it was his time to cut. They were setting the stage all right for Dusty to take the bait."

Buck grunted. "And when I showed up they switched the play to me. Tandy stacked the deck as Grebson turned over his drink so that you dealt me two aces of spades. No wonder Tandy kept complaining until he got a new deck. But he held out the ace of spades when we threw the old deck away."

"Right. They'd figured out who you was, expected you'd jump at the chance to shoot a Box H man. When you didn't, they decided to rile you some more. They stuck a gun in my back, planted me here. Tandy took my pinto to gun you down after you'd gotten me and would claim they killed you trying to save my life. I thought their plan had worked when I saw you peek through the window."

"It almost did," admitted Buck, "until I realized you weren't foolish enough to make a target in the middle of the moonlight. Well, we know the answers now. But so do they. And they've got us pinned down like two lobo wolves at a bunny rabbit's hole. They're smart enough to spread on each side of the shack, to watch both windows and doors. We can't stay here forever. But when we try to break out or sneak...".

Buck broke off, was thoughtful a moment. He softly laughed.

"Maybe there is a chance for the bunnies! Pull off your pants."

DOBIE WAS startled. "Pull off my pants? What the hell for?"

"We've got to draw their fire, shoot at their gun flashes. We may miss. Then again, we may not."

Buck picked up the lariat that had bound Dobie and laid it along the inside of the shack. He measured from the window through which he had dived, to the corner and up to the door. There was about five feet of rope left. Buck nodded.

"They're too smart to shoot at a hat on a stick, so I'm going to try something else." He rummaged in the corners, found a chunk of wood some previous occupant had left. He tied it to one end of the rope.

"I'm going to throw this chunk around the corner and make it come in the door—like Argentine cowpokes hobble-loop their steers. That is, I hope I do. Now open the door and stand to one side."

Buck went to the window, threw the chunk with all his might in what he hoped was a curving arch. But it wasn't, and the piece of wood fell near the front corner of the cabin. Buck tried again, but still didn't succeed. Sound of the chunk landing brought movements in the bushes as the hidden pair's suspicions were aroused. Buck quickly drew the chunk back through the window.

"Cover me this time," he said. "Think I've got it figured out. Got to stick my arm out the window, give it a twist as I throw. They might take a shot at my arm."

Dobie came over, stood ready. Buck thrust his arm through the window, half expected a shot from the bushes. He put most of the rope outside so it wouldn't hinder the chunk in its flight. Then he threw with all his might, giving the chunk a looping, twisting jerk as he let go. There were no shots. They either didn't see his arm in the shadowy side of the building, or were waiting for the whole body of a man as target.

The chunk sailed from his grasp in a wide, curving arch. The tightening rope caused it to whip around the corner and plummet through the door.

"Now," said Buck, "take off your pants."

Wondering, Dobie obeyed. Buck removed his shirt, spread it over the back of the chair. He tied it on by the sleeves and laid the chair forward. He spread Dobie's pants over the back legs, secured them with hogging strings. Then Buck took his own hat and fastened it to the top of the chair back. He stepped back to study his work.

In the uncertain light of the moon, it would resemble a man trying to crawl from the cabin on his hands and knees.

"Now get over to your window and get ready to shoot." He removed the chunk and tied that end of the rope to the chair near his hat. "If they fall for it, you've got time for one shot at their gun flash. If you ever hit a bullseye, do it now. Get set, here she goes!"

With that Buck pulled on the other end of the rope and the chair slithered out the door.

"Here they come." It was Grebson's warning from Buck's side of the cabin. "Hell, they're trying to crawl away!"

From his lair in the brush, Jake Tandy arose. A cruel smile twisted his lips as he let his gun roar. But Tandy fired only once. A gun flashed toward him from a cabin window. Oblivion smote Tandy in the forehead. Dobie Harvell could drive tacks with a gun at a hundred feet, and this distance to Tandy was less.

Too late Turk Grebson saw through the trick, as a gun flash answered his shot. Wildly Grebson fired again as a mighty blow ripped his chest. His second shot tore the ground. Then Grebson tottered and crumpled to the earth.

It was quiet, outside.

"I'll get our clothes." Buck Benton knew they hadn't missed. "Then I'll go for our horses."

"When they were mounted, Dobie spoke. "We'll get Baldy. He's the coroner. I hope we find Dusty there. He's too good a foreman to lose."

"Baldy will cool him off and make him see the light. I'd bet that Dusty has already torn up your check."

"We'll fix that beef contract," Dobie said as they rode along. "I'll be old enough to sign next week. It's a hell of a poor exchange for a fellow like Jim. But it will help balance the scales."

"Nothing will ever balance the scales for Jim Tucker," said Buck Benton soberly. "But at least after tonight, them holes in his back won't itch!"

★

DIGGER JOHN'S STILL

(*continued from page 66*)

"Well, Jedge, I got too much respect for good likker to let somebody bust the barrels and let it run out on the ground. Them barrels Dredger busted was right outa my still. Very pore stuff; couldn't stand it myself. Looked like whisky, smelled like whisky, but couldn't make her taste like whisky..."

"Don't you bother me further!" The judge shrilled as he spied the stage pulling out. "This court's closed." He ran to the stage and climbed in. As it drove off Judge Bullack yelled out the window: "This country isn't ready for law courts yet."

Dredger Dan suddenly appeared in the street clutching a double-barreled shotgun. He charged toward Digger John. The little man was shouting and trying to get Digger lined up in his sights as the big miner leaped on the bare back of one of the corral horses and raced off toward Cold Spring Mountain.

★

IF The Boot Fits

by Art Kercheval

Gramp Crabtree had been killed for his gold, but the old man knew this might happen — and he'd been partly prepared, at least.

FRED RACE stiffened behind the counter of his cobbler's shop, setting down the boot he'd been mending early this afternoon, and he could only stare at Cora Townsend, who'd just come running breathlessly inside with the news. "You say," he asked at last, "Grampy Crabtree was murdered and Lonnie thinks I done it?"

Cora nodded swiftly, and there was grief and anxiety in those pretty gray eyes. "Grampy wasn't able to ride in after his usual rheumatism pills, so I left my clerk in charge of the pharmacy and took them out to his cabin. I found Grampy there, with a bullet between his eyes, and poor Lonnie crying over him. He told me you and Grampy had a quarrel last night over some money you tried to borrow from him. The boy's staying there with his loaded rifle, to protect Grampy's real gold, whatever that means. He let me in, but he'll shoot you or anybody else who comes near."

Fred was ripping off his leather apron, and he came around the counter. "Go back to your drug store, Cora. I'll handle this."

Cora tossed back her blonde curls. "I'm going with you," she said.

"No, you're not," Fred shook his head. "Lonnie and me has got to rake this over alone."

When she'd left, he closed his shop, got his horse at the livery and rocketed east out of Larkspur town. Lonnie and he had been pals a long time, he thought, going hunting and fishing and doing a lot of things together. Sometimes the three of them—Lonnie, Cora and himself—would make long Sunday-afternoon rides in the surrounding Loco Horse Hills.

Bootmaking, that was all Fred knew, and with awl and last he was cutting his way in a rough land. He checked his Colt and reholstered it. You met all kinds of people, in this

business, like the man early this week who'd left the boots Fred was working on. A moon-faced man and his buck-toothed pard. Moon-face had wanted his fancy Justins reheeled and said he'd be back, if circumstances permitted. If circumstances permitted! Sheriff Wilks had said they were likely a pair wanted for bank jobs—Moon-face being Pike Ralston and Buck-tooth being Nort Kells.

The Crabtree cabin stood on a brushy level at the base of Blue Granite Cliff. A thin rope of smoke curled upward from the chimney, for it was chill up here in spite of the midafternoon sun. This rundown place had been Grampy Crabtree's—a sly and unfriendly old devil of a prospector whom rumor said "made some right promising color strikes through the years and hoarded it all"—and his grandson Lonnie's. Fred had hardly drawn rein at the edge of the brush, when Lonnie's Winchester began working at him, from the side window. The bullet screamed past his horse's ear.

"I knew you'd come!" Lonnie screamed. "You didn't get what you wanted the first time, so you're back after it. Grampy fooled you, even if he didn't live to laugh about it. I'll get you like you got him!"

Lead shrilled again, this time taking Fred's Stetson, as he quickly retreated himself and horse. But as quickly he turned, halting in the brush. "Hold on, Lonnie! You got to listen to me."

The half-sob came, a haunting goneness in it. "We're through talking, Fred. I don't care to listen to nobody. Grampy's dying words was 'Save the real gold! Save the real gold!' You look puzzled, Fred, but you know what that means. I don't care about the gold, but Grampy said do it, and I'm sticking—"

Fred saw pleading wouldn't cause Lonnie to lay down that rifle and come out to talk. Edging backward, the quiet-eyed cobbler dismounted, and afoot started his roundabout course through the brush. He came to the jumble of blue-granite boulders to the south, scrambling as silently as possible up the smooth slants to the higher layers. From this angle Lonnie couldn't see him. He worked to a point about ten feet directly above the cabin. Not liking what he had to do, he slipped out of his mackinaw and carefully tossed it on the chimney top. He stared at it just an instant, then began to spirit himself back to his horse.

SMOKE BEGAN to boil from windows and cracks in the logs. But there was no indication Lonnie was coming out, and Fred cursed himself, wondering if he had gone a bit too far. He was all for breaking across the open and getting the kid out of there, even if it meant that Winchester might slam him to the ground.

Lonnie, however, at last had had enough and he came weaving outside, his arm over his eyes, coughing and gasping. He had no rifle with him. Fred ran to him and half yanked, half dragged him back into the brush. "Kid," he said, "that was rough, but you was a sight ornery yourself."

Smoke still had the best of Lonnie Crabtree and he was swaying a little, trying to palm pain out of his eyes, going into a spasm of coughing. At last he seemed to realize that Fred Race was there. Immediately he stiffened and there was a wild, strange look pinned on Fred. "Fred Race! I'll kill you! I got no rifle, but my hands—"

Lonnie was only fourteen, but he had a lot of strength, and it was with difficulty that Fred could seize this hate-filled youngster and hold him, still fighting at arm's length. "Lonnie," he said tightly. "You're going to listen to me. After I'm through, I'll hear your story."

But the youngster wrested himself away, facing Fred with fury working

in him, with the tears just starting to come. "No reason we got to talk, when you killed Grampy!"

Fred, then had to grab hold of his own emotions. "I never killed your grandpa and you know it."

"You came here last night and you quarreled with him!" Lonnie accused. "Because you needed money to build a bigger shoe shop, and you hoped Grampy would loan it to you. You wanted to marry Cora, you said, and this was the only way you'd have a chance."

"Where were you when you figured I jumped Grampy?" Fred asked slowly.

"Out chasing that wild pony up Tantrum Creek this morning," the kid shot back. "You waited until you knew I was gone."

Fred groped miserably for the right words, knowing he could never find them. "Lonnie," he said haltingly, "I know it all adds up bad. I wasn't in my shop most of the morning, because I needed the rest after catching up on boot orders. And, besides, I had a hankering to make another try for that big trout in Bell Lake. But I don't think I can prove where I went. Grampy and me had a few hard words, yesterday, sure. But Grampy never liked most people, including me. It was just his way. Cantankerous. Sort of miserly, 'cept where you were concerned. I didn't have much hope he'd make that loan, but I tried. Kid, you forget we been pals a long time. It don't make sense what you think."

"Pals!" Dashing away his tears, the youngster stared at him, with a baffled wrath. "All that's water under the bridge, like Grampy useta say! Even—even if you did make me a quirt for last Christmas. Yeah, and even if we did go hunting and fishing and—and exploring with Cora." He backed away and the eyes were grim sparks, and he seemed to be fighting against softening up. "Get out of here and don't come back, Fred Race. You won't pull no stunt on me next time—'cause I'll be looking for it and I'll get you with Grampy's Winchester!"

A heaviness in him, Fred rose to his saddle then, and picked up the reins, looking down at the kid. "I can see," he said, "we're getting no place fast. All I'm asking you is, take twenty-four hours to think this over. Then, if you still think I done it, you know where my shoe shop is. Or I'll leave word where you can find me. And be sure your rifle has the drop on me." The funny part of it was, Fred meant it.

HE SWUNG away from wide-staring Lonnie without a backward look, pushing slowly back toward Larkspur. He did not want Lonnie to see the pain in his own face. That kid still meant the world to him. Often, it was, Cora and he had made their plans to take him into the home they would have someday, whenever Grampy passed out of the picture and the kid had no place to go. Now, that cheery, family-circle prospect grew dimmer by the minute!

Suddenly, Fred tensed. What Lonnie thought, this whole range would be thinking before long. His lips tightened. Sheriff Yam Wilks would get wind, sooner or later, of the fact that Grampy was missing from his usual haunts, and he'd come boiling out of his Cottonwood Springs office to investigate. Like Lonnie, he'd twist a lot of things together and, before Fred knew it, he'd be staring at a hangrope, tailor-made for him. Just one course open for Fred Race, humble cobbler—use his spurs getting out of this country. Leave his business and Cora and his dreams...

Fred rowelled over the low broken hills, an agony of defeat in him, because the law just might swallow him up before he could have his last looks at his shop and say his last good-byes to Cora.

The muffled tattoo of gunfire to

the east brought him rearing his horse to a halt, and he hipped around in the leather, while his brows lifted with anxiety. Those sounds had been in the direction of the Crabtree cabin! And there was more than one of them doing the shooting! Once more he cursed, as he neck-reined around, sending his mount in a hammering run toward those shots, now resuming their long, low rumble.

Topping a hummock, he came upon a full view of what was happening, there in the cabin's yard, and fear slid along Fred Race's spine as he bolted closer and pulled up at the far fringe of the brush. They had shot the kid! Fred could plainly see he was wounded as he stumbled across the yard, sprawling just as he reached the brush's edge. And it was Fred who had smoked up the cabin, which would have made a better shelter! Desperately, the kid managed to crawl from sight, into the tangled undergrowth.

Fred worked his bronc forward, deep into the tall, flimsily protecting brush, his blood running hot and haphazard and his gunhand itching to settle with Lonnie's attackers, whoever they were. Something told him here might be the explanation of Grampy's killing. While he got nearer to the kid, his brain and his eyes were busy keening the situation. Somewhere out yonder, perhaps behind those big boulders that paralleled the brush-patch on the south, Lonnie's enemies lay in waiting. Abruptly, Fred realized, the firing had ceased. That was because Lonnie temporarily couldn't be seen by them.

Now he was before the kid and spilling from saddle and running to him, feeling horror steal through him. Lonnie Crabtree lay there on the matted floor like he was dead! Dropping down beside him, Fred saw the blood oozing from the wound in his side. But he saw also that Lonnie had just opened his eyes. They were pain-filled eyes and they were fixed with a crazy motionlessness on Fred Race.

"So you got me," the kid said, setting his teeth. "Just like you got Grampy—"

He didn't say any more, for he had sagged and fainted dead away.

FRED ROSE with a quivering of nerves, mouth drawn back taut, and he pulled his gun. In the heavy silence, his resolve took root, to square off before whoever had done this and give them their needings. For Lonnie looked awful dead, lying here at Fred's feet. Lonnie, who had come to hate Fred Race, even in his last breath; Lonnie, who'd called Fred, Grampy's and his own murderer! And Fred might die, too, before knowing the full answer to this.

"Hey you, kid!" a voice sounded in those rocks. "We know you're in there playin' possum. Damn the old whiskers who figgered he outsmarted us by admittin' his 'gold' was under the floorboards. Sure glad we plugged the old duffer, to keep him from follerin' us; it evens things up some. Rode near ten miles, before me and Nort decided to bust open that locked box. Yeah, the laugh was on us, and old whiskers is chucklin' in hell—there wasn't no gold in it. Full of bolts and washers. But we know there's a real cache around here someplace—another box with the real McCoy—and once we get our hands on you we got ways of makin' you tell us where it is! All right, Nort—start him cookin'!"

Foxy old Grampy! In spite of himself, a little smile feathered across Fred's lips. Grampy had prepared against being robbed someday, so that even in death he had this laughable ace up his sleeve, useless and powerfully unlaughable ace now though it had proved to be! But the smile quickly vanished as Fred caught the sudden hiss and crack of flames, over on his right. Though he couldn't see beyond the undergrowth, he had the answer instantly—the brush had been

set afire, to flush Lonnie out! It would be minutes before the blaze reached to them—yet mighty short minutes.

Fred swore silently. He couldn't drag Lonnie out into the open, now, for that would make them right fancy targets. First he had a chore to do, and he began it with a reckless disregard for his own tall hide; gun fisted, he plunged through churning smoke and the scarlet sweep of flame, toward that blue haze of rocks spread out before him. "Me and Nort," one of them had said. That sounded like there were two of them.

A gun blasted at him as he sprinted for the nearest boulder, in the stubbly clearing between the doomed brushpatch and those rocks. It spoke again, nicking him in the side, as he made it, throwing himself flat. Time—he didn't have much of it! He had to get rid of these killers and yank Lonnie out of that fire trap, whether the kid was dead or not. Time—

Nothing sounded out there before him, and he guessed the pair were making their strategic moves among those tumbledown boulders; making sure they were close enough for the kill of this impudent cobbler from Larkspur town who had horned in on their play. Chancing they were too occupied getting from position to position, Fred bounded up from his rock shelter and dove for another, ten feet distant.

Of a sudden, time found him past a final boulder and in the glittering open, and he had the broad back of a man in front of his Colt. But instinct is sharp in these followers of the owlhoot, and the man was whirling to face him. The moon-faced one who'd left his boots to be mended in Fred's shop. His frantically flung shot brushed the tip of Fred's left earlobe.

Fred triggered, watching his bullet disappear into the outlaw's chest, watching the unfired gun slide from the thick fingers, listening to his ragged cut-off cry as he broke at the knees and fell upon his face. "Circumstances might permit" him his boots again—to bury him in!

Fred wheeled, knowing he was too late, at sudden sound to his right. He got a glimpse of the charging buck-toothed man even as he felt the bullet tearing through his insides. But he managed the shaky squeeze of trigger, and he had the satisfaction as he sensed himself crumpling fast, of seeing the hazy, backward sprawling shape of the last of the Crabtrees' killers...

Fred Race crawled, then fighting off delirium and darkness, hoping to reach the kid, in time to save his carcass from roasting in the spreading inferno...

WHEN HE came to, his head roared, like the U. P. making up time, his brain was in a quagmire, and his eyes were in a swirling fog. Only by painful stages, did he make out that he was in his own quarters in the rear of his shoe store. He was in bed, his own. He looked up, and Cora was standing over him, smiling. She had some kind of medicine in one hand and a spoon in the other. Cora. In this little town, away from the advantages of the county seat, she made the best little sawbones you'd ever see.

He heard the sounds, now, of something hitting the far wall—hitting it with angry thuds again and again—and he turned, and he saw Lonnie abed on the horsehair sofa. The kid must be well on the mend, he thought, with a tight quirk of his lips, for he kept bouncing one of his boots, savagely, against the wall, and sometimes catching it again. When the boot fell out of reach, he strained mightily for it, and repeated the process. And the hot words that boiled out of Lonnie's mouth certainly called for a thorough application of soap and water.

"Lonnie," Cora reproved him, "I told you we've got all the proof any-

body needs. When I got worried about you two, I came out with some of the menfolks to investigate. Almost too late, too. Afterwards, I got the sheriff, to identify Pike Ralston and Nort Kells—"

"Proof! I don't care!" Lonnie exploded loudly, and he slammed the boot again. "Cripesamighty, what do I want with proof? Yessiree, Fred told me to take twenty-four hours to think it over, whole hog or none, what I was gonna do about him—and I have, gal, more'n twenty-four! Enough so's I won't be so loco any more. And I'm saying to hell with it, Fred's first-rate in any man's tally book, without proof! Hey—ain't you two listening to me?"

They weren't, now, for a very good reason. Cora was looking at Fred and Fred was looking at Cora. "The rewards," she was saying brightly. "Plenty, to build that bigger shoe shop. They'll come from a thousand miles to buy your Justins and Coffeyvilles and Naconas—and your own brand of Fred Race boot. Grampy's real McCoy gold goes to Lonnie, to get him some schooling."

Fred was smiling, expectantly—past the wracking pain of his wound. "Lonnie gets a real home, at last, honey," he whispered. "You and I will make it for him—and us."

★

HANGTOWN, U.S.A.

True Fact Feature
by J. J. Mathews

ON THE MAP it was Placerville, but to the old-timers who looked for the precious metal it was known as Hangtown. Originally, it was known as "Old Dry Digging," and the fellow who gets the credit for that name was Bill Taylor.

Seems he and some of his buddies were working on Weber Creek. They were contented with their take, and not even interested when word came that gold had been discovered further up the creek. In order to discourage prospectors from staying around, Bill would say to them, "There are fine dry diggins further up the creek; you can do better there."

So up the creek went the men; and soon tents, cabins, saloons, and the gamblers showed a town had been born. One day there were three men who hadn't done much at getting gold from other earth. They had their six-shooters, so one made an interesting suggestion. "There's a lot of hard cash in those gambling-places. Let's wait till one of them is empty. Then we'll get all the cash. And if he tells anyone about it, we'll kill him."

The plan worked—almost—for, though they got the hard cash, the proprietor told about the holdup. The miners called a meeting and asked for suggestions.

"Shoot 'em," said one.

"Hang 'em," suggested another.

"Flog 'em and kick 'em out," was the third suggestion.

It was this last one that the miners carried out. They took off the shirts of the three holdup men and whipped them severely. Then they said just two words, "Git goin'!"

The three holdup men went to the outskirts of "Old Dry Diggins," and held a conference. The net result boiled down to the fact that they had three revolvers and could do some shooting on their own. They were plumb mad, and were willing to kill the miners who had flogged them, deported them, and interfered in their business plan. So back to town they went.

The miners called another meeting. "What we goin' to do?" was the main topic.

The suggestion was simple. "Teach 'em to respect law and order."

So, before the three returned hold-up-men realized what was happening, a noose went around each neck. There was a nice large oak tree right in front of the *El Dorado* saloon. Up went the ropes, and soon there were three corpses dangling in front of the place. Then the miners went inside and took their liquor. They had taken care of justice in their own vigilante style.

And so the place became known to gold-seekers, good folks, and bad ones, as: "Hangtown."

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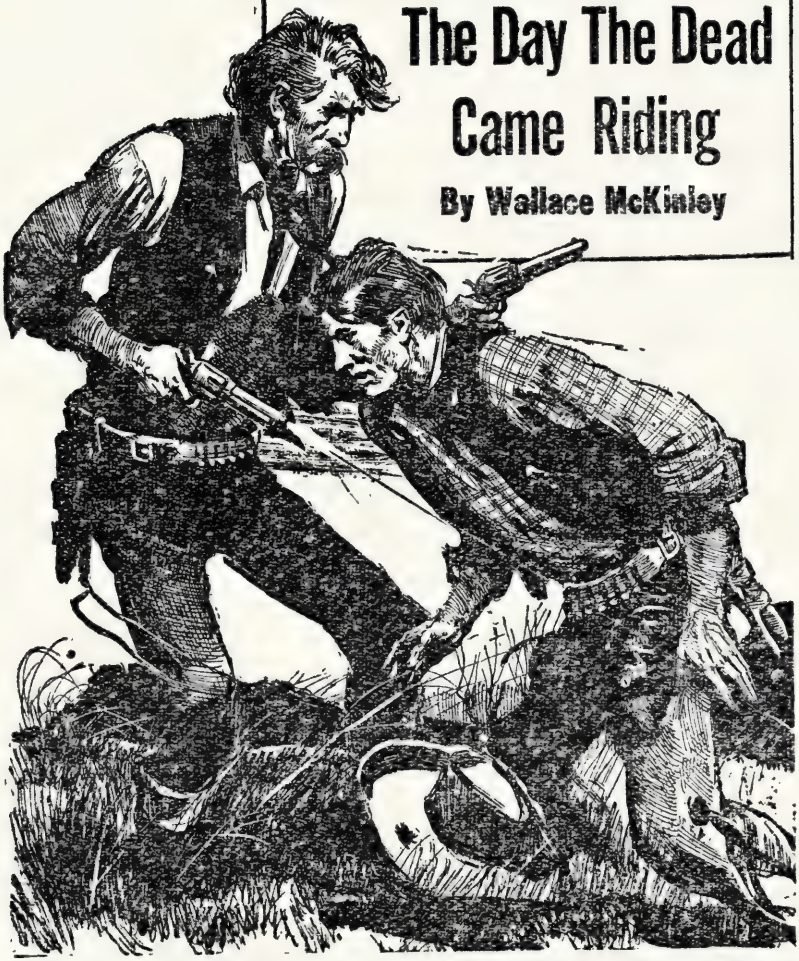
The Day The Dead Came Riding

By Wallace McKinley



They'd known the risks they took, known that greed's guns could send them to their graves, but they stood by their loyalties and died when the time came. Now boothill held them, but the dead were lonely — waiting for one man to join them!

THE TWILIGHT faded; dusk came—then velvety darkness.

Near the side-gallery of a big ranchhouse, two men stood facing the black east in stony silence, waiting. One of them was tall,

★ ★ **Complete Novelet** ★ ★

huge but gaunt, elderly, full-bearded. Although he wore expensive clothing, it was not at all colorful, he was unarmed.

The other man was much younger, squat and dark, bullet-headed, and in range attire His guns were new .45 Colts with ivory grips, showy. Still, with his slitted dark eyes on the east, he built a cigaret, was ready to wipe a match into flame when the bearded man stopped him.

A voice came from the nearby gallery shadows. "I knew you were there. Let him smoke if he wants to."

The huge, gaunt man said: "I didn't think it was in you to eavesdrop. Nan. Go back into the house."

She went. The east was brightening fast now. Before long there was a halloo in Spanish at the front—"Hola!"

"Here," the squat one answered.

A few seconds later, a handsome bay horse, wearing a thousand dollars worth of ornamented saddle and bridle and martingale, halted beside the two men. Out of the saddle came a medium-tall well dressed man of forty or thereabouts. He called himself Mexican;

"Buenas dias, Sonores," he said, almost gently, and stood there with them, watching the east.

It grew lighter and lighter above the rocky hills far over beyond the valley. Then a full moon peered over the jagged crests, a full dull-golden moon oddly like a face afraid. "I told you," the squat hombre said. "Hazy. Hazy as hell. Cattle cain't see."

"But, Senores!" cried the newcomer, in a low voice, "I mus' have cattle, and you have promise me—"

"I know," the bearded man cut in, and turned to the two-gunned bullethead. "Go on with it; take the rider you had with you last time. There's nothing to worry about. All you had to worry about is in jail."

Bullethead went obediently toward the bunkhouse. He half-thought he heard a faint sob from a woman's throat.

From the big range crew he took a slim young cowboy who would have been handsome were it not for his mean pale-blue eyes, and a knife-slash scar angling across one cheek. They went to a corral, caught out and saddled horses, led them to a large but low-roofed barn.

In a stall there, lazily chewing a hay cud, stood an old and decidedly off-color steer of monstrous proportions—twice as large as the average steer, the animal was—with a horn-spread so wide that the entire front of the stall must be a door. This door swung open, and a bundle the size of a man's head was thrust under the bovine giant's nose. With an eager bawl, the steer made for it.

"Quick now," said the squat one.

They got into their saddles, one of them with the bundle, and rode out of the barn and northward ahead of the lumbering brute. They rode fast until the great steer tired and slowed his gait to an eager brisk walk. The slim young Big G cowboy said: "Too damn hazy. Cattle cain't see."

"Orders," said the other, "is orders, Kid. All we got to be afraid of is jail. Trumped-up charge, yeah, but in jail just the same. You carry this damn bundle awhile."

Grass there in the broad valley became very thin and short. One cow to twenty acres, was as much as range like that would support. The two men rode on, the monster longhorn still following. After a few miles, they veered to the right, began a wide half-circle. Just as well to give a certain ranch headquarters plenty of room.

At the upper end of the dimly moon-lit valley they halted, opened the bundle and dropped it to the master cow-brute.

"Now," said the squat, dark man, "all we got to do is ride back. Somebody else can make the trip into Mexico—if this works, which I doubt, 'count o' this haze. With Long and Short in the jailhouse, wasn't any use makin' all that circle to come here. We'll cut it purt' near half, goin' home.

"You ain't afraid o' old Rawhide?"

the Kid asked. "And what if the steer don't come back?"

"I ain't afraid o' old Rawhide. If the hippopotamus don't get back we'll ketch hell, but we cain't help it. Ride, Cowboy."

They saw a few cattle on the return journey. These were somewhat gaunted, thanks to thin grazing, but every last one was a blooded Hereford. The haze was fast making into clouds, the clouds drifting. Soon the moon was obscured. The two Big G riders gave their mounts their heads.

The horses were bearing left to avoid a scrub-lined dry gully when the gully began to explode—flashes so close together that they seemed connected—the faint light was tortured with whizzing hot lead. Bending low in their saddles, the pair of Big G men drove in spurs. The Kid whined: "I'm hit!" His squat companion jerked out: "Hug your leather and keep ridin'. It's a ambush from that gully. One minute more, and only a Winchester rifle can reach us."

He'd barely finished saying that when a Winchester of heavy caliber began to bark. One bullet hit his hat. Another burned his shoulder.

THE KID wilted out of his saddle the moment they had reached the big ranch house. He came back to himself a few minutes later, sat up, noted that he was on a couch in the almost magnificently furnished livingroom. Standing before him, looking very stern in the light of an opal-shaded lamp that sat on a carved mahogany table, was his huge and gaunt, bearded employer.

The big man growled: "You can go to the bunkhouse now, Kid. This is no place for you."

"It's not his fault that he's here, Dad," said the girl. She was slim, handsome rather than pretty, chestnut-haired, with old grief in her topaz eyes. "I had him brought in here, Dad, you see."

The Kid rose. He remembered. "Boss," he said, "there wasn't anything to do but run. First a two-barreled shotgun, then a six-gun, then a rifle."

"Good-night, Kid," growled the big cattleman.

The Kid went. The bearded man muttered: "One answer, and only one."

"Old Rawhide," tremulously whispered his daughter.

He paced the richly carpeted floor, scowling. "If anything happens to that steer—the brute has about finished his work for me, but I've been offered twenty thousand for him, and the offer is good yet!"

Twenty thousand dollars for one tough old longhorn.

His daughter said: "Dad, you've gone clean, stark crazy with love of money and power. Why think of that now? There's something else—"

Nan broke off, stepped to the table and from beneath a pile of books drew a month-old copy of the *Hartsville Courier*. She opened the newspaper and indicated a paragraph among the advertisements.

"Dad, when Jim Lunderford finds this—and sooner or later he will find it—he'll come back here and he'll kill you!"

"TUMBLEWEED! Tumbleweed Jones! You wrinkled old horntoad, you hairy old pack-rat, wake up and pay for your bed!"

The scraggly bearded little prospector had gone to sleep on a bench beside the doorway of his desert water-hole shanty. He sat up blinking. His eternally squinted gaze found a young, tall and lean, sunburned black horse standing there within two yards of him. Then he noted that the man who occupied the saddle also was young and tall and lean.

"Redbird!" jerked out the oldtimer, going to his feet with one claw-like hand outstretched. "Redbird! Wouldn't I know that there damn head o' yore'n anywhere? I shore would. Git down and shake!"

The newcomer had a thick mop of sun-bronzed hair that was still red

enough underneath to keep alive the nickname of his boyhood. He got off his horse and shook hands with Tumbleweed, who spoke again.

"Son, I ain't seen you sence Heck was a pup. Not sence you was a button o' sixteen. Where you been, anyhow? Jest ramblin'?"

"Just rambling," echoed Redbird. His badly worn clothing, range clothing, bore him out. "Wanted to see what the rest o' the world looked like from a hawse's back. This is the closest—fifty miles, is my guess—I've been to the home range in four years. Was crossing this waste country on my way to Texas when you bob up the trail. Anything can happen, can't it? You heard any news about my home-folks lately, Tumbleweed?"

"I'm afeard that I have," blurted Jones, suddenly remembering. "The mentionin' of Hungry Mother and Broken Gun sounds like it, though the rest is a sight puzzlin'. Back in a minute, Son."

He hurried into the shanty and returned instantly with a crumpled and greasy newspaper. "This here," he creaked, "was wropped around a slab o' bacon I boughten me last time I was in Hartsville atter grub supplies. That item there in the advertisements. Son, you reckon that's for you?"

Redbird took the sheet and read:

JIM— Come home as quick as you can. Your father dead & nobody left here with me but Longhorn & Shorthorn. The General ruined us too. Hungry Mother blooms like a rose but Broken Gun not worth a dollar. M. A.

"Yeah. Old-timer, that's for me."

Redbird, Jim Lunderford, was white now under his range tan. Even his voice somehow seemed white as he went on: "I just remarked that anything can happen, and I was correct. Thousands o' copies o' this Hartsville paper scattered over the country, and I don't see one until it's a month old and then find it in the middle of a desert!"

Tumbleweed Jones stared, slack-jawed. Jim Lunderford kept going: "So my dad is dead. He was the best man in the world. Nobody ever went to him for help and didn't get it. Why I stayed away so long, I sure can't see. Maybe he was killed. If he was—"

There Jim broke off and dropped a hand eloquently to the staghorn-butted Big Colt six-gun that he carried in a half-breed holster. Jones said: "Redbird, I know zackly how you feel, 'bout bein' sorry you stayed away so long, me bein' a sawta rambler myself—else why would I be knowed as 'Tumbleweed,' which a tumbleweed allus blows along with the wind, goin' anywhere and everywhere. Looky, Son. Yore pappy shore was a good man. He grub-staked me dozens o' times, and nary a centavo did he ever git outen it. You rickollect that, don't you?"

"Yeah, think I do," drawled young Lunderford.

"Well," the oldster pursued, "I now see a chanst to mebbe pay it back a little. Because yo're headin' for home, and I smells big trouble for you, and can mebbe help. Say, who the hell is 'the General,' which the paper it says ruined yore folks, Redbird? Not old Buck Garland?"

"The General," Lunderford explained bleakly, "is a steer the size of an elephant, nearly. A freak. Not red, but a sort of yellow-mottled dun. Horn-spread eight or ten feet. I'm surprised that the devil is still alive. He won't be, a minute after I've come in gun range of him!"

"And who," asked Tumbleweed, "owns this here General steer?"

"Buck Garland, damn him."

"Uh-huh," mumbled Jones. "So it's old Buck. I seem to rickollect that he also owned a gal who was as purty as a speckled pup with a ring around its neck, named Nan, which you was a heap sweet on when you was a button. How you aimin' to git around that, Redbird?"

No answer.

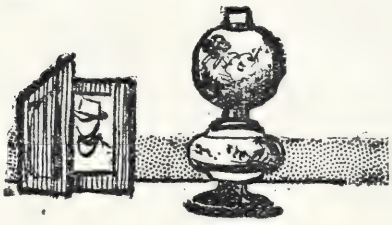
Tumbleweed shrugged. "Uh-huh, so it's a puzzlement. Well, now tell me this here. How the hell could one lone steer ruin a whole cow spread

as big as yore daddy's? And who the hell is Longhorn and Shorthorn, and the jigger who signed hisself M.A.?"

The eyes of the younger man were a clear, steely blue. They narrowed and riveted upon the leathery, scraggly bearded countenance.

"You can't go with me, Old-timer, though if you did go you'd find out a lot more about the fool cow-brute breed than you know now. You can't go because polecats and lobo wolves that walk on their hind legs like a man would eat you up louse jack.

"As for Longhorn and Shorthorn, they're the two best riders we had, one of 'em a heap tall and thin and the other heap short and thick. M. A. is my aunt, my mother's sister, who took the house over when my mother passed. You left that section before any o' these three had showed up there."



JIM then hastened to refill his canteens and water his black horse and himself at the water-hole. He mounted, waved *adios* to still gaping old Tumbleweed Jones, and rode straight southward through the desert.

" 'Hungry Mother blooms like a rose but Broken Gun not worth a dollar'," he said repeatedly to himself in the hot silence, quoting from the much disturbing newspaper item.

His thoughts strayed far backward. He remembered Hungry Mother Valley—so named because there an Indian woman had killed two prospectors in order to obtain food for her starving children—as a semi-desert waste. Broken Gun Valley, watered by a never-failing little river, had been the finest cattle range he'd ever seen.

His father and Buckner Garland had settled Broken Gun when they were young men and tight friends. There was range in plenty for both. But Garland was over-ambitious. He wanted to split the river at the head of the hog-back ridge chain that separated the two valleys, and water Hungry Mother, too. Old George Lunderford had insisted that there was not water enough for both. Just the same, old Buck had gone on having underlings homestead Hungry Mother, buying them out for next to nothing when they had proved up on their claims.

Now he owned all of Hungry Mother Valley, and he had stolen the whole of the river to water it. After, of course, a stiff war. Law? In this far-down, isolated section there was only the law of might and gun.

The town had been built on a flat, mile-long break in the dividing ridge chain, in order that there might be more grazing land. Instead of riding directly home, Redbird Lunderford circled toward the town. He wanted to see what he would see, and hear what he would hear. Beyond a doubt, he was expected. So he rode the last miles slowly, arrived after nightfall.

It was not difficult to find a townsman who didn't know him. This man told Lunderford that Buck Garland had put up a new and very large ranch house a little beyond the outskirts, on the edge of Hungry Mother. One main big hombre, Garland was. Regular king. Had his own sheriff now, and his own jail, although at present there were but two prisoners.

"Who?" Redbird was moved to inquire.

"Oh, coupla wildcat waddies offa the old Long Bar L."

"Thanks," muttered Redbird, and turned his horse, and rode out of the town southwestward.

THE BIG house was painted white, easily located even in the blackness that preceded moonrise. The livingroom and a smaller room that had been built against it—Buck Garland's office—were lighted. Jim Lun-

derford got off his horse in a liveoak clump, dropped rein, and walked softly toward the semi-dark front gallery.

Safer to do his talking through a window, from the night, he decided, and turned toward the corner at his right. A slim figure in a blue dress rose from a gallery chair and ran silently to him. "Jim—!"

He whispered: "Yes, Nan, it's me. I've got somethin' to put up to old Buck. Also, there's a question he's got to answer. Maybe you could answer it for me, Nan, but I want to see how he looks when I ask him."

The girl was shaken. "I know what your question is. You've jumped at the conclusion that your father was killed, and he was—but my father didn't do it!"

Smotheredly, Nan Garland said: "My dad was wrong, Jim, dead wrong. Money and power have done awful things to him. But you must not lose your head and kill him. Because, whatever else he may be, he's my dad, Jim!"

There was another reason. She was still fond of Jim Lunderford. She had not forgotten the little romance of their early youth.

"I won't lose my head, Nan," he promised her. "Ma'am, please, don't follow me now.

Following him now might prove dangerous for her. He went on around the corner of the house.

The lamp that burned on a desk at old Buckner Garland's elbow was so close that it showed the few silver streaks that were in the great brown beard. It showed, also, worry in his eyes. Those eyes, Redbird noted from where he stood in the darkness not far from an open window, switched suddenly to a dark and squat, bullet-headed, two-gunned man who sat in a chair nearby. Matt Lyerly, the Big G range boss, this was. Lunderford had known him very well in the other days, and never had liked him.

"Twenty thousand dollars gone to hell!" growled Buck Garland. "Matt, you looked everywhere?"

Lyerly nodded. "Everywhere. Even in that rock country above. Not hide nor hair o' the brute could we find. Me and the Kid couldn't help it, Buck."

Garland switched his gaze again, this time to a medium tall, very well dressed, swarthy man who called himself Mexican and wasn't.

"I'll see you later, Reynaldo," he said.

Benito Reynaldo rose, picked up his ornamented hat and bowed himself out. His silver spurs had gone jingling down the front gallery steps when Redbird Lunderford spoke from the darkness.

"How much reward you offering for that old thief steer, Buck?"

"Reward—?" Garland jerked his great head around. He did not recognize the voice. But somehow he realized that the man behind it was laughing at him, and he swore.

The voice came on: "That old thief steer sure helped make you rich, Buck. You ruined a dozen ranchers with him. Even them that knew the trick couldn't do much about it. You'd keep 'the General'—my aunt always called the brute that—guarded close, and nobody could get to him to kill him. You picked the time for his raids. so that he was never caught at it. Slick!"

Garland swore again. Matt Lyerly eased a hand toward one of his ivory-butted Colts. "Redbird!" gasped Lyerly.

Redbird proceeded at once: "Yeah, it was slick. Pen the steer up and not salt him for a few weeks, and he'd go to hell for salt. Any animal will. Then when he got it, he'd go straight back home for a good feed and water, and you saw that a herd of cattle you wanted was between him and home. All fool cow-brutes will follow a big, odd-looking steer like that—Lord knows why, but they will.

"Then you'd rush 'em to Benito Reynaldo's border clearinghouse for rustled stock, and swap 'em for slick-ears, which got your Big G brand right off," pursued Lunderford. "You wonderin' why all this talk? Just

wanted you to know that I know exactly how you worked it!"

"And so what?"

"And so this. I meant to ask you who killed my dad, Buck. But it'd be only wasting breath, I see now. If you didn't do it yourself, you had it done. You bristle-backed hog, I'm going to give you a chance to restore the old Long Bar L—which is my ranch now—to what it used to be, before I light in on you. You can start by having Longhorn Jacobs and Shorthorn Kelso let out o' your jail. Right now. Yes—or no?"

Buck Garland's bearded countenance was like granite. He gave Matt Lyerly a look heavy with meaning. He rose with his big, gaunt body between the desk and the man outside, slanted a hand over the lamp and blew, and darkness swooped down.

The bullet-headed Big G foreman sprang from his chair to one of the open windows. His ivory-butted guns were out and ready. He saw movement, he thought, and thumbed a hammer. Immediately following the roar of the gun there was the sound of a body striking earth.

Then a few seconds of black silence. Then a hoarse cry of withering contempt and white anger, out of the throat of Jim Lunderford. "Old Bristle-back, your pet lobo has shot your daughter!"

2

THAT TALL, thin, bean-pole of a man, Longhorn Jacobs, stood at a small, barred window of his jail cell, staring out upon the semi-dark street, listening absent-mindedly to hilarious sounds that came from a saloon a dozen rods away.

"It sure is hell to tell the captain, Short, as the sayin' is," muttered Longhorn. "Short, we got to figger up a way to get out o' here."

"We done figgered, and they ain't no way," grumbled the thickly built Kelso. He bobbed up beside Jacobs. Through the window he could see the tip of a rising moon. "We was only put in jail on account of that—"

"Listen!" cut in Jacobs, wheeling toward the cell door. "If that ain't Redbird talkin', I'll eat a hawss raw!"

Redbird it was. He had just stolen into the sheriff's office, which took up the front fourth of the little building.

"Kline," he was saying, "you're slow. Foolish too. Now drop that iron, get the cell keys off your desk there, and turn my friends loose!"

Sheriff Bud Kline was forty and angular. The yellowish lamplight did not reveal the craft that was in his eyes. Since Lunderford had him neatly covered, he dared not level the weapon he had pulled from leather. He didn't drop the gun; he fired into the floor.

Jim Lunderford acted before the powdersmoke could dim anything. He swung the barrel of his heavy stag-horn-handled Colt and bashed the Garland sheriff down in a limp heap.

Then he was running into the poorly lighted jail corridor with the cell keys in his left hand, and Longhorn Jacobs was speaking fast through an iron-barred door.

"Hurry, Redbird, for gosh sakes! Bud Kline's deputies ain't never far away, and that shot'll bring 'em a-hellin'!"

Lunderford already had guessed the why of the shot. The key grated. He jerked the cell door open. Longhorn and Shorthorn piled out and with Jim raced for the back door as booted feet carried four deputies into the building at the front. The Long Bar L trio almost fell over a huddled slight figure in the half-darkness of the back steps, and plunged onward without stopping to see who it was.

The slight form rose quickly to a crouch, jerked a pair of huge dragoon Colt sixguns up and fired high into

the jail corridor. The deputies halted, swore, drew back. Then the unknown turned and ran hard after Jim Lunderford, Kelso and Jacobs. He overtook the three down the alleyway near Lunderford's waiting horse.

"I sure didn't know we had a friend here." Redbird seized the thin shoulders, peered into the dim face. "Why, it's Tumbleweed Jones!"

Instantly, old Jones creaked: "Moon's risin', Son, and we got to hustle, or we shore as hell will stop us some hot sixgun lead. Two of us on this hawss, and two on mine, which it's standin' little ways furder down the alley in the dark. Pronto, hombres!"

●

Jacobs rode behind him on his weary raw-boned roan. Kelso rode behind Lunderford on the weary black. They chose a devious route out of the Garland town, cleverly eluded their deputy pursuers.

As they rode up Broken Gun Valley in the early moonlight, they talked. Tumbleweed Jones began it.

"I jest had to come, Redbird, on account yore pappy, old George Lunderford, he was so good to me years back. I'd been watchin' around afore you popped up in the sheriff's office. Told you I might help some, and I did. Sawta kivered yore gitaway, that's how. Didn't know I was a hell-roarin' two-gun hombre, Kid, did you? Well, I am! Well, what happened?" Lunderford told it briefly as he knew it. Thanks to whatever gods there were, Nan Garland had only been knocked unconscious by Matt Lyerly's bullet.

Longhorn Jacobs said then: "Redbird, Garland got to be crazy bitter towards your dad towards the last. He didn't let up even after we'd found your dad shot dead on the range—we dunno exactly who done the killin'. We heard old Buck had swore he wouldn't stop the war as long as they was a single Long Bar L cow critter left."

"Yeah, Redbird," Shorthorn Kelso said, "and the locoed old lobo sure meant it. And he is locoed. Fightin' a lone woman, and her last two cowboys? Hope to tell you he is. Got some o' his town scrapin's to pick a ruckus with me and Long, and then had us jailed for disturbin' the peace—so's he could have us out o' the way when he made a raid that he hoped would finish wipin' the old ranch out! Believe you said that old thief steer was gone, Redbird. Wonder where?"

Redbird shook his head in reply. However he had his suspicions.

THEY REACHED the rambling old Long Bar L ranch house to find it all dark. Jacobs and Kelso took the pair of worn horses around to the back. Jim Lunderford, with Tumbleweed Jones walking stiffly at his heels, went to the front gallery steps and hallooed softly.

In the livingroom a light sprang up. "Come in, Jim, honey," his aunt called. "It's just got to be you. I've been looking for you a month."

Dog-weariness had driven her in from her watch on the range. She was tall and spare, almost bony, deeply sunbitten, iron-gray. She wore a man's overalls and shirt, scuffed cowboy boots and floppy Stetson hat. Of strictly pioneer stock, was this woman.

"Tumbleweed Jones," began Redbird, as the two men drew up before her in the livingroom, "meet my Aunt Mary Andrews. She sure is solid gold. Can ride, rope and shoot like a man, and maybe cuss like one for all I know! We're bad for nicknames here, Tumbleweed. She likes hers. It's—Rawhide!"

"Hiyah, ma'am," grinned Tumbleweed, and shook hands with her, and winched at her grip. Her eyes, like her nephew's, were a clear, steely blue. They twinkled amusedly now.

Redbird also shook hands with her. He hastened to tell her all he knew to tell. Then Mary Andrews said: "I'd guessed what was up, Jim, and I took a rifle and a sixgun and a

shotgun with me and set out to watch the range close that night. Saved what cattle we had left, and captured a fine, big Stetson hat—Matt Lyerly's as anybody can tell you, with a bullet-hole through it—and also I captured that there big Old General steer at last! After I'd shot some hide off Lyerly and the man with him, I hunted up the steer and found him before he'd licked up all his salt. Just took that salt from him, and he followed me the same as a dog, and now I've got him well hid!"

"I'd sort of guessed that," Jim said. "Anything to eat here?"

MARY ANDREWS, old Rawhide, led the pair of men to cold food on the dining table. Jacobs and Kelso came in, ate hastily, then went to guard the range.

Those left at the dining table began to talk tentative plans for the rehabilitation of the old ranch. It would be anything but a sinecure. Three able-bodied men, one elderly woman, and one desert-rat viejo against the clever Buck Garland and his minions and his money. Garland even owned the so-called law!

"How any human being could go as crazy as Buck did over—" began old Rawhide, when her nephew interrupted:

"It's a disease, like smallpox, Aunt Mary. A dream of empire, sort of, at the bottom of it. Old Buck changed the day he buried his wife, long time ago, I've heard, but I don't believe that had everything to do with it.

"Speaking of dreams," he went on, "that reminds me of one I had last night sleeping in the desert. It was mighty plain. I was riding Buck Garland's trail, I thought, and my daddy was riding with me. And all day I somehow felt that my daddy was riding with me—once I even turned in my saddle to look! Loco stuff? Imagination running wild? Maybe? Maybe. But I couldn't shake off the idea, somehow."

The three of them talked on and on. After an hour or so, there was a clattering of hoofs at the front, and they rose and hurried out to see a slim form running toward the gallery steps. The moon was bright. The identity of the newcomer was plain.

It was Nan Garland!

Redbird sprang to help her up the steps. She swayed. He steadied her. The bandage about her temples, he had noted, carried a fresh stain. He said: "You shouldn't be out, Nan, hurt like that!"

"I had to come, Jim," she said, throatily. "You must get away quick! They're riding up the dry old riverbed so that they won't be seen until they're nearly here. It's the law, or what passes for law. Jim, you hit Bud Kline too hard with your gun-barrel, and killed him!"

JIM LEVELED his gaze across thin grassland and to a long line of dead and dying cottonwoods that marked the course of the old riverbed, and saw no movement. "So a new sheriff and a posse is after me. All your dad had to do to appoint him a new sheriff was to single out the meanest man he knew, and say, 'You're it.' Well, who wears the star now, Nan?"

"Matt Lyerly!" she answered in a trembling voice.

Lunderford's grin was hard. He said: "Two-gun hombre. Gunfighter and killer—one who knows cattle. Nan, we sure thank you for coming. Now I'll help you on your horse, and you must ride for home before Lyerly and his gang get here and see you and make trouble for you. If—"

He broke off short. The moonlight had just shown him that there was no horse. The girl had been in such haste that she'd overlooked the little matter of dropping rein, and her mount was gone!

"Straight home, of course, as horses will," old Rawhide said. "But we'll fix that. You can take our little sorrel mare, Nan, and she'll come back when you let her loose. You'd better start, Honey."

Nan Garland went with old Raw-

hide around the house and toward the horse corral and saddle-shed. Jim Lunderford and Tumbleweed Jones remained standing on the gallery, both staring off toward the dim cottonwood line. Jones broke the silence.

"What're you aimin' to do about it, Redbird?"

"Well," Redbird answered, "I'm not going to stay here and be arrested and jailed and maybe hung. Not me. For the present I'm hiding out. With the moon as it is, this might be a good time for me to make an estimate on how much work is necessary to put the river back where it used to be. You stick here, Tumbleweed, and help wherever you can.

He hastened around to the back. The little sorrel mare was just moving southeastward with Nan in the saddle. Old Rawhide helped her nephew catch out and saddle his sun-burned black horse. Then Lunderford mounted and rode toward the head of the hog-back ridge chain that separated Broken Gun and Hungry Mother Valleys.

The distance was all of two miles. The shallow little river gleamed prettily in the light of the high moon.

Turning the stream, he found, had not required any very great deal of work. A dam of earth and stones had been all that was necessary, the current readily washing out a new bed through the then semi-desert known as Hungry Mother. Lunderford's gaze soon picked out an old V-shaped trench, and he knew what it meant. In that trench Garland men had knelt for shelter and fought off Broken Gun Valley defenders while laborers created the dam. More than one—more than a score, perhaps—had died in that vicinity.

There were young cottonwood trees growing rankly along the river below. From the shadows of those came a voice.

"Yeah, it ought to be simple enough, Redbird. Just build you a dam across the new river, and tear out the old one, that's all, and inside another year Broken Gun is grass country again."

Lunderford sat on his motionless horse like a moon-lit bronze statue. Only his lips moved.

"Simpler than that, Fellow. Tear out the old dam first, and use the material in building the new dam. That's what I'll do, after I've stomped out a big nest o' rattlesnakes."

"Like hell you will!"

Sheriff Matt Lyerly rode out of the cottonwoods below. From the trees above other men rode to surround Jim Lunderford. Each of them had a gleaming and ready gun in his hand. Lunderford put empty hands skyward.

"You made better time than I figured, Matt," he said quietly, "and you're smarter than I figured, and you've got a better eye and ear than I gave you credit for. If you're wondering why I didn't cut dirt when you first spoke, it was because my horse is worn to a frazzle. On your fresh horses, you would have overtaken me, and you'd have had an excuse for murdering me. Yeah, shooting me in the back."

THE ODDS, eleven to one, were too great for a gun-fight.

Lyerly rode up and lifted Redbird's big Colt from its holster. They took Redbird to town and jailed him.

Aching with weariness now, he went to sleep quickly, hard though the cell cot was. But at dawn he was up, fresh again, pacing the stone floor with his mind busy.

A little after sunrise, the new sheriff brought the new prisoner a thin breakfast on a thick plate. Lunderford had barely finished the unsatisfactory meal when the huge but gaunt, spade-bearded Buck Garland appeared at the iron-barred cell door.

"Hiyah, Old Bristle-back," calmly

said Lunderford. "You look sort of worried. I'll bet you've lost a penny somewhere!"

"That won't get you anything, Redbird," growled the spadebeard. He went to the point, which was like him. "You know where my big steer is, Redbird, don't you? And you don't want to hang, do you?"

"So that's the ticket," Redbird said. "I had an idea all along that this Bud Kline business was a frame-up, because I felt sure I hadn't hit him hard enough to kill him. That old longhorn range thief is worth twenty thousand dollars, I heard you say. To Benito Reynaldo, of course, for him to use down in Mejico!"

Old Garland's countenance told him instantly that he had rung up a bull's-eye. Lunderford went on talking. "Tell you where the General is and you'll see that I don't hang, though you'll have to hold me in jail to keep me out o' mischief. Right?"

Garland lost a little more of his iron poise. Redbird had hit another bull's-eye! He grinned a hard grin and pursued: "Well, I'm not going to tell you where the damned old thief is, Buck."

As though he knew!

The big man narrowed a cold eye almost to a slit. His resourceful old brain had given him something.

"When that Rawhide aunt of yours finds out what you're up against, cowboy, she'll bring the steer back to save you from a rope necktie!"

There was truth in that, Jim Lunderford knew. Women were women. And he would still be in jail!

Lean face white under its range tan, Jim Lunderford stepped up close to the bars of the door. He leveled his steely blue eyes like weapons at Buck Garland. He told Buck Garland this: "I hate bringing grief to Nan, but there's no other way. I've just been thinking about all the men who have been killed in building this bigness you've built here. Those dead men have brothers, fathers, uncles, sons, cousins who must feel a good deal as I do. They're scattered, but they can be brought together, and they'll put you on your damned hog knees in the dirt. Because—I can say this without stretching it much—their dead will ride with them, just as my dead will ride with me.

"You're going to find, Buck, that the dead ride hard!"

3

AN HOUR passed. Again Redbird paced the floor of his cell. He drew up near the small, barred window, stared through at nothing for many minutes. Suddenly he realized that he was looking at two men who were hurrying along the edge of the street on foot. Each of them was carrying a pick and a shovel.

"No gold in this section, hombres," Redbird drawled.

"Gold hell," one of them said. "We're headin' for boot hill to dig a hole for what's left o' Bud Kline."

Redbird laughed. "Garland ordered you to pass here so that I could see. Lends color to the frameup."

"Haw, haw!" jerking a thumb backward. "Look comin'!"

Coming there was a mule wagon, and in it a long pine box. On the box lay a short pine board with Bud Kline's name burned across one end with a running-iron. "More color for the frameup!" called Jim Lunderford.

The driver, a Garland henchman, heard that. He reined his team over close to Redbird's cell window and there stopped it. He twisted six cheap gilt thumbscrews, and lifted the top of the box. "That," he said, "ought to jar you."

It was Bud Kline, and he was dead.

"I still think it's a frameup!" Lunderford barked.

The wagon went rattling on toward the town's boot hill.

The squat and bullet-headed Sheriff Matt Lyerly brought a chair and set

it against the corridor wall opposite the door of Redbird's cell, turned and beckoned. A slim young man came and dropped into the chair. He had one badly scarred cheek, and the meanest of pale-blue eyes. He pulled his holstered six-gun into his lap, ready. Lyerly returned to his office.

"Special guard, little polecat?" said Redbird.

The Big G Kid scowled, said nothing.

More time passed. The middle of the day drew near. Then Jim Lunderford heard the voices of his Aunt Mary Andrews and Matt Lyerly lifted in argument. The new sheriff sat at his office desk. The tall, rugged woman stood facing him squarely. In her lean hands she held a large covered dish.

"Jail food ain't fit for anybody," she was repeating. "I cooked up a good dinner for Jim, and he's going to get it!"

"Wrong, Miss Rawhide," Lyerly growled, out of the villainy of his shriveled heart. "He ain't goin' to get it. Prisoners don't rate good eats."

She had expected something like this. "Matt, I've got a forty-dollar Stetson hat that used to be yours. Bullet-hole in it, but that don't hurt. You let me give this dinner to Jim, and you've got my word that I'll bring that hat to you. What say?"

Lyerly's dark eyes narrowed with cupidity. Forty dollars was forty dollars in any language. A minute later, he had unlocked the door to Redbird's cell and Mary Andrews was passing the dish through.

Redbird lifted the cover, and dropped it crashing. The next split second, Sheriff Matt Lyerly had the muzzle of an old Colt .38 pressing hard into the pit of his stomach. The weapon had been in the dish.

"Reach high!" swiftly bit out Jim Lunderford.

At once Lyerly jerked up his hands. Lunderford was all set to kill him, and he knew it. The gun was small—a longer one wouldn't have fitted inside the dish—but it was deadly at that range. Old Rawhide had vanished. She had spotted her nephew's gun-belt on Lyerly's desk. The Big G Kid was still gaping at the suddenness of the thing when she came back and covered him with the staghorn-handled Colt.

"Reach high!" she said after Jim, and the Kid dared not disobey.

Lunderford had snatched the Garland sheriff's pair of ivory-butted big guns from their holsters and tossed them aside. He shoved the Garland sheriff into the open cell. He disarmed likewise the Big G Kid, and shoved him after Lyerly, locked the cell door and threw the keys away.

"Yell for help too soon, either of you," clipped Lunderford, "and you'll trail Bud Kline!" He reached toward old Mary for his gun-belt, and got it.

His aunt had timed her visit well. Those of Matt Lyerly's deputies who were not out trying to catch Longhorn and Shorthorn napping, were at dinner. But at that, time was precious. Mary Andrews and her nephew rushed to the now deserted street. She rode away from her own horse, Redbird on Lyerly's.

THE TWO had made a good hundred yards across lots when the erstwhile Big G range boss and the Big G Kid began to yell for aid. The two rode faster. Old Tumbleweed Jones on his rawboned horse came as though out of nowhere and joined them. As he galloped along his pair of huge dragoon six-guns banged his lean thighs ludicrously.

"I'd snuck in to kiver yore gitaway, Redbird," he explained. "I'm hell on stuff like that, ain't I?"

Again Redbird picked a devious route out of the little town and escaped. When they were in the cover of dry-river dead cottonwoods, he said: "Aunt Mary, you had the little gun so well hid among biscuits and hard-broiled beefsteak that it's a wonder I found it so quick. But you'd winked at me." He went on: "I figured you'd give that old General steer

back in hopes of saving my neck," and she replied promptly:

"I tried to, but somebody'd stole the General last night!"

"Twenty thousand dollars worth," observed Jim. "Bet he went straight to Benito Reynaldo's ranch under the border!"

It was a good bet. Jim then told old Rawhide of the big thing he had in his mind—getting together the relatives of those who had been killed that Buck Garland might realize his dream of empire; leading them against Garland and his minions and his money; afterward, if he won, settin' up real and just law in place of this shameless joke that was called law now.

Mary Andrews, also, was sorry for old Buck's Nan. But there was nothing else to do, she agreed, fighter that she was.

They found Shorthorn Kelso alone on Long Bar L range. He had been playing a grim game of hide-and-seek with Garland deputies almost since sun-up. As for Longhorn Jacobs, he had—or, well, Longhorn had just vanished.

"Let the cattle go," Redbird Lunderford said, "And come with us, Short. We're setting out to look up two-three dozen names, which are well scattered over the country."

They put out briskly for the Long Bar L buildings. They had just arrived when Longhorn Jacobs came riding in from another quarter. Jacobs had a bullet-notch in one ear and a red-stained bandana bandage about one arm. He looked very mad. "Where you been, Long?" asked Shorthorn Kelso, and winked, for he was in the plot.

Jacobs did not wink back. "It's hell to tell the captain, Short, as the sayin' is," he breathed. Then he said to Jim Lunderford:

"Might as well own up, Redbird. Me, I snuck that General steer down to Reynaldo's ranch last night, aimin' to sell him and bring you the money to fight with. Reynaldo kept the hippopotamus and wouldn't pay me! Oh, yeah, I set some gunpowder afire and got me a jigger or two—not that dressed up polecat Benito, though. Howsoever, I found out somethin' right big, Redbird. Listen:

"They's a Mex named Squareface Pede who's been workin' for Buck Garland long time," Jacobs hurried on, "and last night Buck kicked him out. Well, he went to Reynaldo's. Mad? Squareface was sizzlin'. He told me that Sheriff Bud Kline got up five minutes after you'd gun-barreled him, and run out o' his office lookin' for you, and said he bumped into that there scatter-brained Big G Kid in the dark—and said the Kid thought it was you and killed him!"

"What a peach of a frameup that was," angrily said Lunderford. "The Mex tell you anything else, Longhorn?"

Jacobs nodded. "Yeah, he did. He said it was Matt Lyerly who ambushed your daddy, George Lunderford, on his own range!"

Buck Garland, to give the devil his due, was not aware of that. Neither was he aware that the Big G Kid had shot Bud Kline by mistake. His men did not tell him everything.

BUCKNER GARLAND was uneasy all that week. To save him he couldn't rid his mind of what Redbird Lunderford had said about the dead riding hard. Odd that this should stick with him so!

He'd sent out spies to report upon Redbird's movements. These came back with news to the effect that Lunderford and his two cowboys and a scraggly bearded little old-timer were covering the adjacent territory that represented every point of the compass, talking with people here and there and everywhere....

Then one morning two-gunned Sheriff Matt Lyerly walked into his chief's home and office with something that really was disturbing.

"Buck, I sure couldn't hardly be-

lieve my own eyes. Jim Lunderford has got dozens o' hombres up at the dam, and he's sure fixin' to turn the river back into Broken Gun!"

"Stop him!" jerked out Garland. He rose to his gaunt six feet two, swore into his beard, hammered on the desk with his great fist. "Stop him!"

"Hold on a minute, Buck," said squat and dark Matt Lyerly. "They musta got there early last night, because they've already throwed up dirt breastworks, and nearly all of 'em has got rifles as well as six-guns. We'll need four to their one in thrashin' 'em out, and at that we'll have us a fight. Them ain't border scrapin's he's got, Buck. Nossir! They're ranchers and cowboys, mostly. A heap o' them which you run out o' this section went some'eres else and done well, Buck!"

Again old Garland swore into his beard. His voice when it came again was hoarse and filled with rage.

"Round up every man you can find in town, and every mother's son on Hungry Mother range, and go up there and keep the river where it is! If we haven't got enough men, I'll send to Benito Reynaldo for more. He's got at least twenty. Mostly renegades, but they can fight!"

Lyerly wheeled, almost ran. Nan Garland appeared. "Dad, I couldn't help overhearing. You mustn't do that. It's wrong. Jim Lunderford is only trying to get back water that rightfully belongs to his ranch in Broken Gun Valley, don't you see?"

"If he can take it, he can have it!" old Buck snapped at her. "Look here, girl. What's your interest in the Lunderford redhead?"

He had never known much about the youthful romance. His daughter dared not answer his question. Garland shrugged. Hastily he belted on a Colt six-gun, snatched up a Winchester rifle and belt, and went to a horse corral for his big gray saddler.

Nan changed quickly into riding-clothes. She, too, hastened to a horse corral.

Garland rode northward in Hungry Mother, and on the way he picked up the Big G Kid on a lean buckskin cow pony. Nan followed them on a palomino. Neither saw her, for cattle were so thick there in Hungry Mother that the little palomino seemed lost among them—thousands upon thousands of cattle, all wearing the Big G brand.

When old Buck and the scar-faced Kid drew rein, they were in the cover of pinons at the upper end of the hog-back ridge chain. Within medium rifle-shot of them was a sight that drew a gasp from each.

Sheriff Matt Lyerly had not exaggerated. Rather, he hadn't said enough. Not only did Jim Lunderford have a big crew of men there at the river dam with him. He had brought wagons laden with digging tools and wheelbarrows, food supplies and blankets and ammunition. A military strategist might have laid out the new earthen breastworks. There was, in fact, a military efficiency about everything.

"You think you're going to ruin me, Redbird?" Garland bellowed. "I'll show you! I'll give you until noon to get away from there!"

Lunderford's reply was quite forceful. It, too, was military. He dropped his pick and straightened, and in a strong voice began to call roll:

"Henderson . . . Black . . . Payne, Charley . . . Payne, Ed . . . Carroll . . . Porter, Dave . . . Porter, John . . . Addison . . .", And so on until the names of all his men, except for Tumbleweed Jones, had passed his lips.

And each of them had answered lustily: "Here!" The grim significance of it was not lost on Garland, and Buck Garland's bearded face had gone the color of wood ashes.

It had been a roll-call of the dead as well as the living!

But old Buck was not beaten, not by any manner of means. He turned

to the Big G Kid: "Now you'll see why I brought you along. Ride a streak to Benito Reynaldo's ranch under the border, and tell Benito I said to get here as quick as possible with every man and every gun he can spare. Tell him that damned elephant steer won't cost him anything if we win. Hustle!"

The Kid hustled.

THE BIG boss sat his big horse there in the pinons and watched while the old dam was attacked and the new dam begun. The sun went high and the air grew hot. Water trickled into the dry river-bed, then began to flow in growing volume. Garland swore.

Then Jim Lunderford's two spies rode in. One of them was Mary Andrews, the other Tumbleweed Jones. "Bunch of men coming up Broken Gun, Jim. Twenty-five, I'd say," reported old Mary.

"All o' thirty comin' up Hungry Mother, Redbird," old Jones said. "You better be ridin' fer home now, Miss Rawhide. Red water'll soon be runnin' two ways from here, Ma'am."

She didn't want to go. Her nephew insisted a trifle heatedly. Then he noted that she was wearing Sheriff Matt Lyerly's bullet-holed forty-dollar Stetson. She explained: "I'd promised to bring him the hat, Jimmy, and I've got to keep my word. Thought I'd see him here today."

"Some other time, Aunt Mary," Jim said. "Ride home, fast."

Old Rawhide shifted her Winchester rifle to the crook of the other arm, and rode off. But she did not go home.

Each of Lunderford's friends knew his place in this trench or that, and went to it. Before long Buck Garland's two parties came galloping into view. Old Buck called them to him there among the pinons at the foot of the upper hog-back ridge. Redbird spoke strongly across the little distance.

"Want more of the dead riding your trail, Buck? Yeah, you'll have it that way. It's not my idea to ruin you, Buck. I'll leave you enough water to do your cattle until you can make some arrangement about them."

"For the cattle's sake, y'understand!" Longhorn Jacobs took it upon himself to bellow; and Shorthorn Kelso yelled: "You can turn your wolves loose now, y'old boss lobo!"

"Yeah, and see that you come with 'em!" Tumbleweed Jones creaked loudly. "Because I'm shore aimin' to pay you back pussonal fer killin' pore George Lunderford!"

Redbird was in a trench-end very close to the river. A glance to his left showed him the barrels of many Winchesters gleaming in the hot sunlight. He glanced the other way, and saw the dripping, sopping-wet figure of Nan Garland!

She had crawled up the edge of the stream, out of anybody's range of vision. Lunderford frowned in quick dismay. But it was the girl who spoke first. "Jim, this will be awful! Wholesale bloodshed—" She sank down beside him in the fresh earth. Her topaz eyes were round and filled with anguish, her face was pinched and white. "Can't you possibly think of a better plan, Jim?"

It was odd that Redbird should remember, in this tight moment, just how much he had thought of Nan Garland in the old days. Suddenly he knew that he liked her just as much now. His clear blue eyes turned half sad, he blurted in desperation:

"Nan, can you think of anything better?"

"Yes! That is, I believe I can." She gripped his arm with a still muddy, small hand that trembled. "Suppose—suppose you put something like this up to my daddy, Jim. He's to pick the one best fighter he's got, and you're to pick the one best fighter you've got. Each fighter represents his side. They meet halfway between you and shoot it out, and the side that loses, quits. Only one death, and maybe not even that. Please, Jim, try it!"

4

AFTERWARD, Lunderford was glad that he told her he would before she told him this: "It's your best chance anyway, Jim, because my father has sent the Big G Kid after Reynaldo and his men!"

Redbird shouted across to Buck Garland, put the girl's plan before him. Furthermore, Redbird named the two representatives—Sheriff Matt Lyerly for old Buck, and himself for himself, though Lyerly was the faster with a gun.

"Afraid, are you? Trying to crawfish? We won't let you, Redhead!" Garland shouted in a red rage, then ordered his men into battle.

Lunderford made Nan lie flat in the trench behind him. He set many rifles talking back to the many talking weapons of the enemy.

Garland's fighters kept in their saddles, rode circle around the trenches in the old manner of attacking Indians. Moving fast, constantly bobbing, they were the most difficult of targets. And because of this, added to the fact that Lunderford and his friends were in neat shelter the casualties at the end of three broiling-hot hours were few.

The Garland henchmen drew off then, grouped around their chief and waited for Reynaldo. When he arrived, there would be a concerted rush that would end the fight.

The pseudo-Mexican was not long in making his appearance. He rode in all his bright Beau Brummel glory at the head of his column of twenty renegades, and stirrup-to-stirrup with him was the scar-faced Kid. They came in back of Garland and his townsmen and range hands, there at the foot of the upper hog-back ridge.

Jim Lunderford saw. His eyes twinkled grimly. He lifted his voice: "We've got you, Buck! I sent half my force down the old river-bed, out of sight under the bank, and they're right now up there in the rocks just behind you! You're trapped between us, and we're all in cover, and nearly all of us have rifles. You can save yourselves by dropping your guns and riding this way in the open, and you sure had better do it!"

Garland didn't believe that. Simultaneously, Matt Lyerly and the Big G Kid fanned out a few shots up the rocky nose of the ridge with the intention of proving that it was a bluff.

Instantly the very earth seemed to explode southward, northward. Caught in the galling two-way fire, Garland's men soon fled, those who were able. It was Reynaldo's renegades who broke first.

"Look at 'em!" bellowed Longhorn Jacobs. "Look at 'em high-tail!"

BECAUSE he was Nan's father, no man had lined gun-sights on Buck Garland, and he had come through unscathed. Jim Lunderford had requested this.

"Damned cowards!" the still unwhipped old Buck thundered at his running henchmen. They were scattering like so many rabbits. "Damned cowards!" And two of them wheeled their horses and rode back to him.

The two were his sheriff and the Big G Kid. The wounds of both were negligible. Lyerly had an idea. He finished outlining it to the Kid before they reined in beside Garland. In rage that blinded him to all wisdom, Matt Lyerly called over to Lunderford: "I'm takin' you up on that proposition you made, Redbird! About me representin' Garland and you representin' yourself. If you ain't a crawfish, come a-shootin'!"

He dismounted reloading one of his ivory-butted big six-guns. He put the gun back into its holster and went stalking cautiously toward Redbird. The Kid got off his buckskin and eased over to a scraggly pinon.

Cold, white anger gripped Jim Lunderford. He had little room for doubt-

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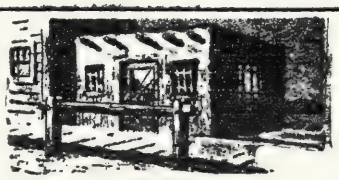

Know Your West

(continued from page 8)

across the Green River. Tom Clarke was handling the sure-footed mules, who were totally unconscious of the single passenger. And Big Mike Klenk was acting as special guard and cook. When the coach reached the other side of the river he smiled.

"Maybe we will have a story to tell our kids, who knows? That editor from the East is certainly using up a lot of ink writing those letters. And he gets a mighty fine price for just putting down words about his trip overland. But we got no complainin'; gettin' double pay to look after him."

Eighteen miles of desolation, and then the coach stopped at the station on Black's Fork, at the junction of Ham's Fork. Editor John Russell Plaunt left his coach and ate a hurried meal. Then, accompanied by the guard, he walked to the stream and stopped. Before him were several large tents; grazing nearby was a herd of about five hundred head of cattle and some fifty horses. Several half-breed children were playing, unconscious of the approach of the two men. The flap of the tent opened and a huge bearded mountain man came out and walked towards Mike Kent He merely asked a one-word question.

"Hungry?"

"We just ate at the station," replied the guard. "But this man, here is an editor from back East. He is crossing the country in a coach and writing letters telling folks how things are in the year 1859. He gets good money for doing it. He would like to ask you some questions."

"He gits money, then I git some," grunted Bill Bass and he stuck out a large hand. The Honorable John Russell Plaunt dropped a gold piece into it and then asked his first question.

"How do you make a living?"

"I'll do the answering," said the guard, "because that's the way this mountain man wants me to do it. Many folks have asked him the same thing. You see it is like this. Many emigrants are going to the coast. When they hit this place, they trade their tired oxen and steers for fresh ones on almost any terms. Bill was a mountain man and used to do trapping. Then he got this idea in his head. The tired and half-starved animals he gets with cash for his fresh stock he lets graze. By the time the next wagon-train comes he makes another swap. They say he's worth seventy-five thousand dollars. Anything else you want to know?"

The editor had noticed those half-breed children and was more than curious. But he still was the city-bred fan and phrased his question delicately. "I would like to know something about his married life, if that is possible."

The bearded man didn't blink an eye, but just nodded his head as though giving Mike the signal to answer that question.

"They don't think much of your white Eastern women in the mountains—too fine and fofarraw. They can't make moccasins or dress skins, and they won't give perfect obedience to their lord or master. And what white woman will take a lodge-poling?"

The next question didn't have to be asked as two squaws went past the tent. Mike read the editor's mind by

[*Turn to Page* 105]

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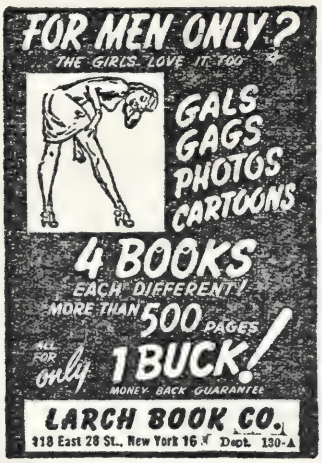

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the expression on his face.

"Sure, Bill has two squaws. It's like having two wiping-sticks to your rifle. If one breaks while ramming down a ball, there's still hickory left to supply its place."

A man who seemed ageless passed the tent. The mountain man passed a quick word of greeting and the oldster continued on his way.

"You just saw Old Daniel Boone in the flesh," remarked Mike. "They say he is eighty-six, and he can certainly handle his gun like any man forty years younger."

The coach was on its way westward and inside the editor was making notes on his special writing table.

"Think we should tell him?" asked Mike of the driver in a tone of voice that wanted a negative answer.

"That Bill was an actor during his teens, almost starved, came West and came here? Naw!"

Question: Can you spot the big error in this story? You'll find the answer at the end of this department.

PURSUIT

FOR TWO days the posse had been trailing their man; now they had taken time out for a quick lunch. John Kiernan spoke to his buddy, Sam Tams.

"All that Pat Davis does is to sit in the saddle and make us follow him. He seems to know where he is going, but why keep it a secret? With all the duties he has, he still finds time to go after Jeff Clark."

Sam Tams laughed. It gave him a great kick to boost the little man who could handle the toughest boys north of the Rio Grande.

"Pat has six sets of duties He's Sheriff Klinger's deputy and also United States deputy marshal; he was elected constable last year; he is cattle-inspector for the Cattle Raisers' Association of Texas and the same for the Cattle Sanitary Board of New Mexico. And I mustn't forget to add he was appointed town marshal."

"You almost worship the fellow,"

[*Turn to Page* 107]

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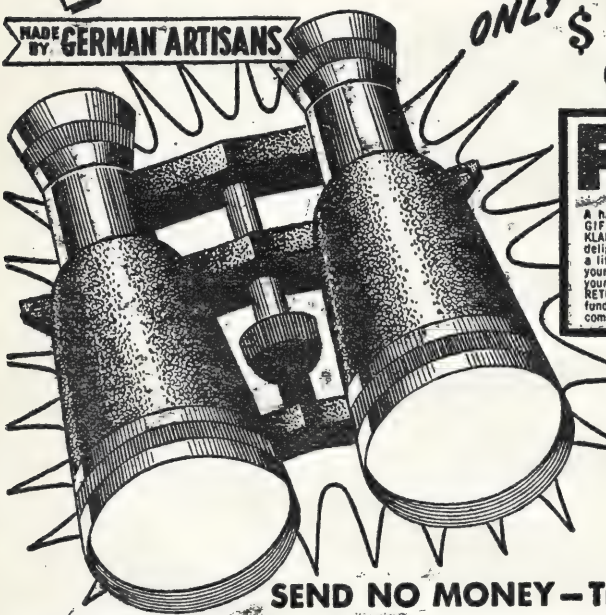

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added the deep voice of Burt Griffin. "Behind his back we call him Little Pat. But he can beat any Indian when it comes to reading signs. He knows he is going to find Jeff Clark. Showed me the clear-cut footprints of a horse on the soft bank of the stream we crossed this morning. Then he picked up the trail again when he spotted the droppings of the horse. Into the saddle—we are heading for the railroad station."

Four hours later, the posse reached the railroad station. There was a telegram waiting for Pat. He read it with evident satisfaction, then bid farewell to the station-master and the lone man waiting for the train that seemed to take centuries to get to its appointed place.

"What's all the excitement about?" asked the man with the word "Easterner" written all over his clothing and face.

The station-master grinned, for he realized the man had not recognized the most famous man in the state. "Going after Jeff Clark and they'll get him. Guess Jeff has been running off some mavericks; this time he'll end up with either a noose around his neck, or some bullets in his hide."

"Just what is a maverick?" asked the curious easterner.

"Just before the war between the states," explained the station master, "a man by the name of Maverick settled on the Lavaca river and started a cow ranch. He put the letter M on all his animals and went to fight. When he came back he was able to round up all his cattle from the hills because they had his letter on them. They say Jeff has been helping himself to calves from Lou Margus' ranch, and Margus' brand is the letter M. So any animal with the letter M is now called a Maverick."

The posse were still riding towards the south when Pat raised his hand and they stopped. Pat dismounted and examined carefully the remains of a fire.

"No signs of any coffee-making

[*Turn Page*]

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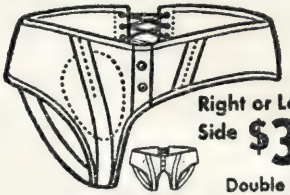

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here," he announced, "and that means Jeff has run out of coffee. He likes the stuff better than his own life. Bet he heads towards Mike's place and tries to get some coffee from the old man."

JEFF CLARK was tired. He had spent most of his life either running away from the law or trying to break out of jail. Now he had finished the third cup of coffee that Mike had set before him.

"If you make the border before night, then you better stay in Mexico and forget the states," advised Mike who was repaying a debt. He could never forget that Jeff had once saved his life while they both had been hunting buffalo.

"There's a girl back in Colorado I can't get out of my mind," sighed Jeff. "She said that if we got hitched she would keep me on the right side of the law. Maybe my spirit is running low, but I got a feeling in my bones that this is the last time I argue with the law."

From the hilltop the men spotted the small place that Mike called his home. When they were within gunshot, a bullet came from inside the place. Jeff had spotted the posse and Mike had told him he would fight at his side.

"Come on out of that house," shouted Pat. "I know you are inside, Jeff—and you got Mike with you. He hasn't done anything so why risk his life. Don't be a fool. No shooting. I want to talk with you."

"If you want to fight it out," said Mike, "I got enough bullets to hold them off and grub enough for three weeks."

"Pat is a good man," replied Jeff, "and this isn't your fight. All I know is that he's after me, and he must have good reason. I'm going out and see what he has to say."

"What is it this time?" demanded Jeff. "Going to shoot me, or take me back to prison? I never held up that

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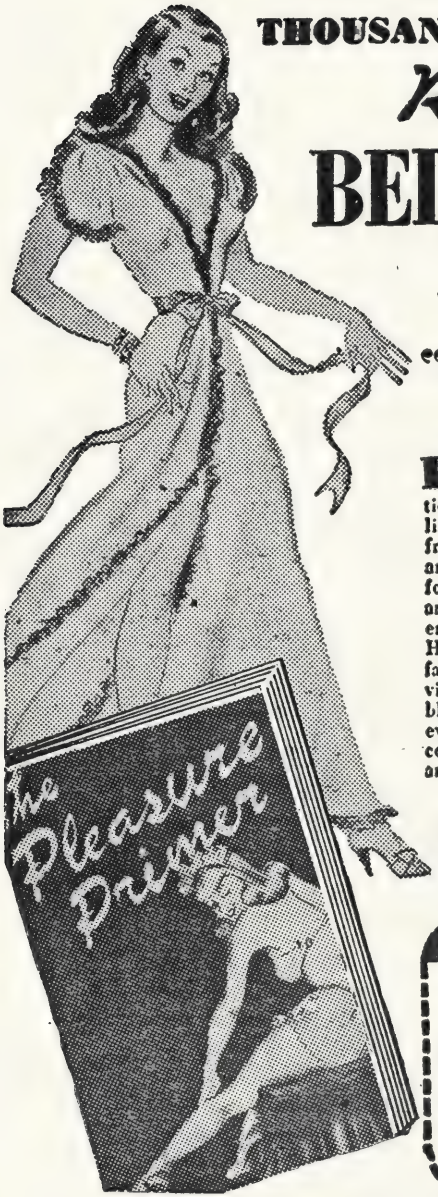

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stagecoach. Or are your boys going to hang me to the nearest tree?"

Pat laughed loud and long and the rest of the men in the posse tried to figure out what could be funny in a situation that looked like death for Jeff. Then Pat took a legal-looking document and the telegram from his saddle bag.

"Nat was killed two weeks ago trying to hold up the Second National Bank. Before he died he cleared you in that stagecoach holdup. I got the governor to sign a pardon for you, so no jail. And here's a telegram that says your Uncle died and left you the Double O ranch. So come with me and forget your past; lead an honest life and marry that gal waiting for you." *Question:* Can you spot the big error in this story? You'll find the answer at the end of this department.

●

ANSWER TO "ROAD AGENTS"

The West did not use blank cartridges. How about that ulster and boot deal? It is O. K. as well as the courtesy shown to two women.

References: 1. *Digging Gold Among the Rockies*—G. Thomas Ingham. Cottage Library Publishing House, 1881. See pages 219 to 227 for road-agents, and about the ulster and boots story. 2. *The Cowboy*—by Philip Ashton Rollins. Charles Scriber's Sons, New York, 1936. See Page 55. No blanks in the West. 3. *Rocky Mountain Empire.* Edited by Elvon L. Howe. Doubleday & Co. Garden City, N.Y., 1950. See pages 64 and 66. Didn't want money from women in holdup.

ANSWER TO "THE MOUNTAIN MAN MAKES MONEY"

Daniel Boone died in 1820, so he couldn't be around. How about the rest of the stuff? It is all true—the way he made money with livestock and also about the attitude towards squaws.

References: *An Overland journey from New York to San Francisco in The Summer of* 1859—Horace Greeley. C. M. Saxton, Barker & Co. N.Y., 1860. See pages 194 to 194 about changing livestock and

[*Turn To Page* 112]

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making money. Also about the squaws. *In the Old (FAR) West*—by George Frederick Ruxton. Outing Publishing Co. N.Y., 1915. See page 161 about attitude towards a white woman. *The Life of Daniel Boone*—Cecil B. Hartley Grosset & Dunlap, N.Y. N.D. See page 352 for death of Boone.

ANSWER TO "PURSUIT"

The explanation about a Maverick is all wrong. The rest of the stuff is O. K.

References: 1. *Mean as Hell*—Dee Harkey, 1948. University of New Mexico Press. See chapter seven, "Six Sets of Duties." 2. *A Texas Cowboy*—Charles A. Siringo, 1950. William Sloane Associates, New York. See page 43 for correct Maverick story, as to origin of term. 3. *Triggernometry*—Eugene Cunningham. The Caxton Printers, 1947 Caldwell, Idaho. See page 227 for coffee-grounds idea. 4. *Thirty-three years Among our Wild Indians*. Colonel Richard Irving Dodge, 1882. A. D. Worthington and Co. See pages 566-576 for "signs" when trailing.

THE DAY THE DEAD CAME RIDING

[*continued from page* 102]

ing that Lyerly had murdered his father. Lyerly was a professional gunfighter, a two-gun killer. And yet, Jim left Longhorn Jacobs holding Nan Garland in the safety of the trench and went marching to shoot it out with the killer. Friends advised him against it, told him that he had no chance. He did not seem to hear.

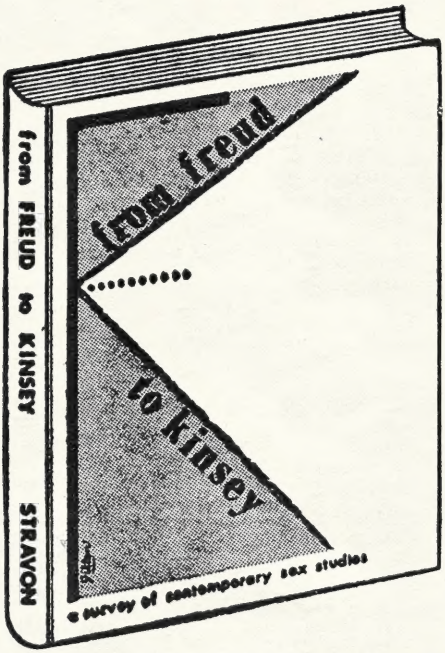
Shorthorn Kelso and Tumbleweed Jones climbed over the fresh dirt and trailed along a few rods behind Redbird to see that the play was fair.

When but thirty yards separated Lunderford and Lyerly, neither had made a move toward leather for his weapon. Their pace slowed. Each was watching the other's right hand, and each right hand was tense and ready. The watchers held their breath. Nan Garland sobbed.

Suddenly, swiftly Redbird reached for staghorn and steel.

Lyerly's gun-hand moved so fast that it seemed a mere blur. His shot ripped out first by the infinitesimal part of a second; the two reports

[*Turn To Page* 114]



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were almost as one. But it was Lyerly who fell back supine to stare with sightless eyes into the brassy sky!

Ivory gun-butts are showy, but slick in a sweaty hand, and they spoil aim sometimes. Instantly then Tumbleweed Jones was creaking: "Look out, Jim," and Tumbleweed went for a dragoon Colt.

Shorthorn Kelso cut down at the scarred face and mean pale-blue eyes back of a six-gun's sights, over there under a scraggly pinon.

"Lowdown trick," jerked out Shorthorn, as the Big G Kid crumpled. "Lyerly had him all set to get you if he didn't, Jim. He—"

Redbird interrupted, addressing Garland.

"You've lost, Buck. But I'll show you my heart's in the right place. The river can stay split between Hungry Mother and Broken Gun, and you can put down wells to make up whatever water shortage there is. We'll have a new order of things, and a proper law that will require you to settle for all the damage you've done —I mean, of course, as far as it's possible. Do your best, Buck, and I think you can forget that the dead ride hard."

GARLAND'S bearded face became terrible. His great dream shattered, for the time being the man was stark mad. He spurred his big gray horse toward Lunderford. His Winchester he had given to one of his men. He had his Colt six-gun out and ready.

"It's between us, Redbird!" His voice was hoarse and shaken. "You and me, Redbird!"

He stopped the gray saddler and began to seek a straight aim at Jim Lunderford's left shirt-pocket. Instinctively, Jim had brought his own Colt up to an aim. Then he thought of Nan, and he couldn't let the hammer fall though it meant his death. Then one of Tumbleweed Jones' old dragoon six-guns blazed and bucked and roared!

Buckner Garland dropped his weapon with crimson welling on his right shirt-sleeve. He stared as though he didn't quite understand. He bent his head until his full beard was low on his gaunt broad chest, and his horse moved of its own volition, carrying him away.

While the others stared breathlessly, there were other hoof sounds. Mary Andrews, old Rawhide, came riding in as though out of nowhere at all, and stopped her horse near the still, squat form of the last Garland sheriff. She took a bullet-holed forty-dollar Stetson of her iron-gray head and tossed it lightly downward.

"I don't know how else to keep my promise to you, Lyerly," she said in a tight voice. "There's your hat."

Old Garland was riding, not homeward, but desertward. He was whipped at last. His reason was near tottering. His daughter and Jim Lunderford followed him. They were gone until late in the day, and nobody else ever knew what had taken place, but Garland was a contrite and humble man when he appeared in town again.

Nan and Jim rode a hundred yards or so behind him. Mary Andrews spied the two coming, and rode to meet them. She had news, she said, big news. So had he, her Redbird nephew said. Nan was going to marry him.

Mary's eyes dimmed, as the eyes of women will, then she said joyously: "Jimmy, that old General steer has made good, and we can forgive him for everything. Reynaldo left his under-border rancho deserted, you know. Well, the big steer somehow got loose and come back, and he brought a thousand missing cattle with him, among 'em every blessed Long Bar L Hereford we've lost in the last year! We won't kill him now, Jimmy, will we?"

"Kill him?" Redbird Lunderford smiled at his Nan. "Gosh, no, we won't kill the General. If my future wife and her daddy agree, and I think they will, we'll put the General in clover for life and salt him every day!"

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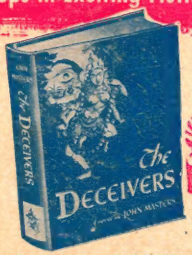

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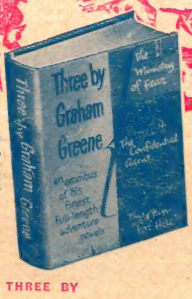

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